



Old Ben

JAMES OTIS

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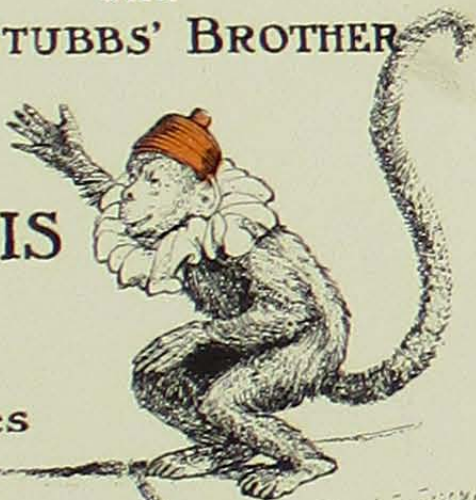


OLD BEN

The Friend of
TOBY TYLER
and
MR. STUBBS' BROTHER

by
JAMES OTIS

with
illustrations
by
Sarah Noble-Ives



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OLD BEN

I

THE ARRIVAL

NEARLY every boy in the little town of Guilford knew exactly when the stage, which ran daily to and from the city, was due, and each one made it a matter of business to be in front of the hotel at that particular moment. It was much as if they believed the driver or the passengers might be disappointed if they failed to appear, and, therefore, were determined there should be no cause for complaint.

One afternoon in October, when the boys were at their supposed post of duty, the stage had not driven up to the hotel even though it was ten minutes past the regular time of arrival, and men as well as boys were speculating

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as to what could have happened to delay Jot Doten, the most punctual driver on the road.

Some of the loungers suggested that the nigh-pole horse had had one of his tantrums; but the boys preferred to believe that the stage had been attacked by robbers on the Cove road, when Leander Leighton was seen coming down the street at full speed, looking every inch the bearer of important news.

"Toby Tyler!" he shouted while yet some distance away, much as if he thought it would be unsafe to keep his news a secret any longer. "The stage has stopped up to your house, an' Old Ben, the circus-driver, an' the skeleton, an' the fat woman, are all gettin' off. They've got a lot of trunks, an' look as if they'd come to stay."

It would be difficult to describe the effect which this announcement had upon the boys, and even the older members of the waiting party were not unmoved.

Toby Tyler was a small, freckle-faced boy, who, a year and a half before, had run away with the very circus of which the new arrivals were members; but the reality of a circus life was so entirely different from the dreams he

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had had that, at the first opportunity, he turned his back upon the sawdust and spangles, only too glad to be home again with Uncle Daniel and Aunt Olive.

During the summer just past, Toby and his companions had attempted to conduct a "little three-cent circus," but Mr. Stubbs's brother—a monkey presented to Toby by Old Ben, one of the new arrivals—had made of the effort a dismal failure, by playing such pranks with the tent and the curiosities contained therein, that anything like a successful exhibition was beyond the range of possibilities.

It was during the past summer, also, that the circus Toby had run away with passed through Guilford, and at that time Old Ben, one of the drivers, Mr. and Mrs. Treat, the skeleton and fat woman, and little Ella, a child equestrian, dined at Toby's home. Uncle Daniel had given all of them a cordial invitation to visit him again; but neither Toby nor any of his friends dared believe it would ever be accepted, and on this particular evening the entire boy population of Guilford was in a fever of anxiety, as to the

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reason for this unexpected coming of such famous people.

Toby and his partners in the amateur circus enterprise—Leander Leighton, Ben Cushing, Walter Grant, Joe Robinson, and Bob Atwood—set off at once for Uncle Daniel's home, which was a quarter-mile from the center of the village, all trying to talk at the same time, and each having a theory of his own as to why the "circus folks" had come.

"I'll bet they heard about what a good show we'd turned out if it hadn't been for the monkey, an' how many handsprings I could flip without stoppin', so have come here to get us all to go with their circus," Ben Cushing, the would-be acrobat of the party, said emphatically, and then he "flipped" a handspring to assure himself he was still in good practice.

Ben spoke so positively that Leander was convinced his view of the matter must be the correct one, and said, mournfully:

"If that's what they're here for, you fellers will have to come down to my house an' help me carry in a whole pile of wood, so's I'll have time to practise on the 'cordion, for

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I don't believe I could play 'Old Hundred' with more'n one finger now, an' I'm 'most sure I've forgotten the whole of 'Old Dog Tray.'"

"I did pretty well howlin' for hyenas an' bears when they wasn't anythin' more'n squirrels or rabbits, an' was in a small tent like ours; but I'm 'most afraid I couldn't howl loud enough in a reg'lar show," Joe Robinson said, modestly yet sadly, fearful lest he should be deprived of the opportunity of traveling with the circus because his lungs were not two or three sizes too large for his body.

Walter Grant, who was seldom known by any other name than that of "Reddy," owing to the brilliant color of his hair, felt perfectly satisfied that he was as well qualified for ring-master in a real circus as in the little one they had tried to start, and Bob Atwood seemed quite certain he would be the funniest of all funny clowns.

"I'll go right to work an' write a whole lot of songs, so's to have 'em to sell," and then, even as he ran, he sang in a voice which was woefully broken because of lack of breath,

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"Way Down Upon the Suwanee River," as a sample of what he could do for these circus people who were probably traveling around the country in search of talented performers.

During several moments all the party appeared to believe fully in Ben's suggestion as to why these wonderful people had visited Guilford, and then Toby said, much as if he was sorry to dispel the bright hopes:

"I say, fellers, they couldn't have come here so's we'd get up a show for 'em, 'cause, don't you see, it's 'most winter, an' circuses only go 'round in the summer."

In an instant every boy realized the truth of Toby's argument, and then the party slackened pace, much as if there was no necessity to make haste if these visitors had come for anything less important than the getting together of a circus company.

"But it takes a good while to get a big show started," Ben said, after a short pause, "an' jest as likely as not they want us to make ready for next summer!"

There was a world of hope in such a thought, and again the boys ran at full speed, Ben turning an occasional handspring, Joe howl-

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ing as loudly and as much like a hyena as possible, Bob trying to sing his favorite song, and Leander fingering an imaginary accordion.

It was not many moments before they arrived within view of Toby's home, and there on the porch could be seen the trunks of which Leander had spoken, thus proving that he had not been mistaken as to the coming of guests.

"Hurrah!" Ben shouted, as he turned a somersault over the fence to avoid the loss of time in opening the gate, and in less than thirty seconds the entire party was crowding into Aunt Olive's kitchen, regardless of her oft-repeated injunctions never to "come in without first wiping their feet on the corn-husk mat."

One look at Aunt Olive's face was sufficient to convince the boys that the visitors would remain for supper, at least, for it wore an expression of great perplexity as she surveyed the contents of her pantry, undecided as to which of the many tempting dainties should be offered the guests.

"Oh dear, Toby!" she said, as the boys

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entered; "here are your friends come to make a visit, an', I declare, I never had such bad luck with my cake before! What *shall* I give 'em for supper?"

"I'd put out a pile of doughnuts, with jest as much cheese as they could eat," Ben cried, believing that, as the acrobat of the prospective circus company, his opinion was of great value, and then he glanced at Leander to learn if he agreed with such a proposition.

The musician, however, was in no condition to give an opinion just then, for he was gazing earnestly at a long row of pumpkin pies, and trying at the same time to remember the notes in the second verse of his song, which was about all to which he could attend.

"Dear me!" Aunt Olive sighed, as Ben spoke, "how little sense boys do have!" And then she became aware of the fact that the lads had entered the house without wiping their feet. "Now, you children know that I've told you as many times as I've got hairs on my head, not to come in here without usin' the mat. Start right back an' clean the mud from your boots, an' then go into the

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front room, where your Uncle Daniel is tryin' to amuse the company."

The boys obeyed the command, but were not as careful in doing so as would have been the case if Aunt Olive had not been quite so deeply engrossed in the important matter of deciding what to serve for supper; and then they went into the parlor, where the horse-hair upholstered furniture looked like so many signs warning them to keep out.

When the boys entered the stiff-looking but sweet-scented front room, Uncle Daniel and his guests were laughing merrily at some story the former was relating, and they might have believed the old gentleman had been telling of their circus but for the fact that to them there was nothing comical in its failure, therefore it did not seem probable any one would make sport of such a serious matter.

Old Ben was the first to greet the boy who had ridden by his side on the monkey-cage so many nights, and he said as he took Toby's round face in his large, rough hands:

"Well, bless my soul, Toby, it seems to me as if you was a-gettin' shorter all the time. You're a good deal like our old trick mule,

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Pete, who stopped growin' when he was only about half the size he ought'er been, an' then was so obstinate that nobody could ever coax him to get fat."

"Come right here, Toby Tyler, an' let me squeeze you once," the fat woman interrupted, as she held out her enormous arms, and Toby was immediately hidden from view, like a very small nut in a very large pair of crackers.

"There, there, Lilly, my dear," the skeleton said, as after considerable difficulty he succeeded in extricating Toby from his somewhat uncomfortable position, "give me an opportunity to greet our friend Mr. Tyler upon this happy occasion."

Then the very thin man led Toby to the middle of the room, where he could survey him at his leisure, placed his hands under his coat-tails, as was customary with him when he was about to make a speech and had any coat on, and began what was evidently intended as an address of welcome.

Old Ben gazed at these preparations with no little amusement, and a deep, red hue spread over his face, until Toby knew he was

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struggling with one of those spasms of internal laughter when it always seemed more as if he was choking than enjoying himself.

"My dear Mr. Tyler," the skeleton began, raising his coat-tails higher with the utterance of each word, "it gives myself and my dear Lilly—perhaps I should say more particularly Lilly—the greatest possible enjoyment—"

"There, there, Samuel, don't begin one of your long-winded speeches now," Mrs. Treat said, as she went up to her fleshless husband, grasped him firmly but gently by the waist, lifted him from his feet, and then sat him down on the sofa with a force that caused the springs to creak until it seemed as if she had broken the thin gentleman. "You'll have plenty of time to deliver an address; but just now I must see Toby myself." And again she enveloped the boy in her huge arms.

"My dear," Mr. Treat said, plaintively, as he straightened his collar and appeared to be feeling of his neck to assure himself that it was yet unbroken, "you really must be careful how you handle me, or some day we shall have an accident which will diminish our

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next summer's receipts, for you know that skeletons now command a much higher salary than do fat people."

Mrs. Treat paid no attention to her husband's remonstrance, and both he and Old Ben left Toby to the care of the enormous Lilly, while they greeted his companions. The boys were in the highest possible state of excitement and enjoyment at being spoken to so familiarly by a circus man and a living skeleton; but yet they could not refrain from envying Toby just a little, because of the great show of affection displayed by the fat woman.

When Mrs. Treat did finally conclude to release Toby, and turned to the other partners, Old Ben said as he took the boy by the arm, pulling him on his knee:

"We have come, Toby, to—"

Each boy in the room was listening very intently at that instant, for it seemed certain some important scheme was about to be proposed; but it was destined not to be divulged just then, for Aunt Olive interrupted the old driver by saying, as she entered:

"Supper is ready, an' I know you must be

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hungry after your ride in that lumbering old stage." And to the boys she added, "Now Toby, you an' your friends must wait till the company are through eatin', an' then you shall have the table all to yourselves."

The boys agreed to this without any show of dissatisfaction, although all would have been more than willing to be deprived of food if thereby they could have remained in the supper-room, where it might be possible to hear Old Ben conclude the remark which Aunt Olive had interrupted.

"Let's go out in the shed, boys," Ben Cushing said, as he led the way, and, while the guests were where they could form their own opinion of the "luck" Aunt Olive had had with her cake, the boys were seated in front of the cage in which the monkey, Mr. Stubbs's brother, was confined, discussing the reason for the coming of the guests.

"It's no use talking, fellers," Ben finally said, in an emphatic tone, "they've come to get us to go with the circus."

And every boy present believed that the acrobat had simply stated the truth.

II

A MONKEY AT SUPPER

IT seemed very much as if the monkey knew that the boys were talking about a circus, and, possibly, remembering his exploits when they were trying to establish the little one, he danced to and fro in his wooden cage until it seemed certain he would force his way out.

"That feller acts disgraceful," Ben Cushing said, looking at Mr. Stubbs's brother in a reproachful way as he was thus forcibly reminded that, but for the monkey, he might have been one of the proprietors of a successful circus. "I s'pose he's heard that Old Ben has come, an' thinks he'll get a chance to break up another show. If Mrs. Simpson had ever got hold of him that time when he frightened her cat so she didn't dare to come out from under the barn for two days, he wouldn't be dancin' 'round at such a rate now."

"I guess he only wants to see his friends,"

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Toby replied, ever ready to find an excuse for his pet, "an' he knows that I ought'er taken him in when we went."

Then, in order to soothe the pain which might have been in the monkey's heart because of the neglect, Toby took Mr. Stubbs's brother from the cage, put on his neck a little silver collar that had been presented him by some members of the circus company, and tried in every way to make him presentable to meet the visitors.

The monkey exerted all his strength to prevent this "dressing up"; but, by the aid of his companions, Toby soon had him brushed until his coat fairly shone, and he looked very much like what he should have been—a neat, respectable fellow.

"We'll take him in as soon as the folks are through supper, an' let him see his friends; then he'll act more decent," Toby said, as he caught Mr. Stubbs's brother just in time to prevent him from leaping on Joe Robinson's head.

"He can't act any worse," growled Ben, who had never forgiven the monkey for the ruin he once wrought among circus property;

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and then he put badly behaved monkeys far from his mind by attempting a bewildering series of handsprings, during which he came to grief through a combination of the saw-horse and a stick of wood.

The time that elapsed before they were called to supper would have seemed very long to the boys had it not been for the arrival of a dealer in old clothes, who appeared so very anxious to make some kind of a bargain that Toby tried to please him. An old coat and hat which the boy had worn until the original color or material of either could hardly be recognized, were hanging in the shed, and these Toby brought out to the evident disgust of the traveling merchant.

It was some time before any satisfactory arrangement could be made; but, after Mr. Stubbs's brother had investigated the dealer's wares until he was more than anxious to leave the farm, five cents was decided upon as the price of the coat and hat.

The old-clothes man left the yard, hardly looking as if he thought he had made any very profitable bargain, and Toby and his friends discussed the coming of the circus

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people until Aunt Olive called them to the second supper-table.

Toby knew that he was not allowed to take Mr. Stubbs's brother into the dining-room, and yet if he put him back in the cage, even for a very short time, all his neatness of appearance would be gone; therefore he carried the monkey with him, hoping Aunt Olive might be so occupied with her guests that she would pay no attention to the little fellow.

Fortunately for the success of this plan, Aunt Olive was in the parlor when the boys entered the dining-room, and for the first time in his life Mr. Stubbs's brother had a seat at the table. Joe fastened a napkin under the monkey's chin, and together he and Toby believed they could keep the unruly animal somewhere within the bounds of propriety.

It being necessary for Toby to give all his attention to Mr. Stubbs's brother, Ben Cushing took it upon himself to act the part of host, and the reckless way in which he piled the plates high with cake and preserves, to the exclusion of meat and bread, won for him the undisguised admiration of all present. They may have seen the duties of host per-

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formed in a more rational manner, but never so satisfactorily.

During fully five minutes everything progressed in the most approved fashion. Mr. Stubbs's brother sat gravely in his chair nibbling at a piece of cake, and copying after Toby as nearly as possible. He behaved so nearly as if he had always been accustomed to sitting at the table, and so little as if he had any intention of misbehaving himself, that Toby and Joe ceased to watch him closely, while they gave more attention to their own supper.

"I'd never believed that monkey could behave himself so well," Ben said, as he insisted on giving Leander a very large supply of preserves to be eaten with a very small piece of bread. "He acts jest as if he'd always been in the habit of comin' to the table."

It seemed much as if the monkey understood that he was being praised by his enemy, and was disposed to resent it. Ben had hardly ceased speaking, when Mr. Stubbs's brother pulled the napkin from his neck, brandished it in triumph for a moment, and then leaped directly on the table, landing

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with one foot in the preserves and the other in a pie, while his tail made a long, round furrow in the butter.

In an instant the greatest confusion reigned. Toby ran around the table in the vain hope of catching his pet without loss of time; Ben Cushing flourished the carving-knife, as if he intended to end the monkey's career by killing him, while the other boys fled to the several corners of the room to avoid the showers of sweet things which were being flung in every direction as the animal ran from one end of the table to the other.

Every effort was made to catch the monkey before the noise should alarm Aunt Olive; but Mr. Stubbs's brother seemed determined to work his own ruin, for he eluded every attempt to make him captive, and caused a terrible clatter of the dishes as he leaped wildly about in the highest state of excitement and joy.

"Oh, dear!" Toby cried, in distress. "Aunt Olive will be sure to hear the row, an' if she comes out an' sees him cuttin' up so on her best table-cloth an' dishes, I don't know but she'll hang the poor little fellow."

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A moment later the dining-room door was opened, and Toby fully expected to hear a shrill cry of dismay and anger from Aunt Olive; but, instead, he heard Old Ben ask:

"Now then, youngsters, what'er you up to?"

There was no real need why any one should answer the question, for the old driver could see exactly what was the trouble, and he took prompt steps to prevent a further waste of eatables by making a prisoner of the monkey.

Old Ben had had considerable experience with animals, and it appeared almost as if Mr. Stubbs's brother was aware of the fact, for immediately the old man started toward him, he cowered submissively in the center of the table, the butter and preserves on his face causing him to present a reasonably correct picture of despair.

The old driver lifted the monkey uncere-
moniously from the table by the collar, wiped the sweet and greasy mixture from his face with a large, red handkerchief, boxed his ears soundly, and handed him to Toby with the remark:

"Monkeys hain't no fit kind of things to



THE MISBEHAVIOR OF MR. STUBBS'S BROTHER

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bring to the table, an' you'll get into a good deal of trouble with your aunt if you keep on tryin' it."

"But I had to bring him in," Toby said, piteously. "'cause we'd dressed him in great shape to see you, an' if he'd been left out in the shed he'd got himself all mussed up again."

"It's their natur' to git mussed up," the old man replied, sagely, "an' it ain't any kind of use to make a try at keepin' 'em clean. Now, if you boys don't want a regular hornets' nest about your ears, you'll do your best at settin' the table to rights before anybody else sees it."

Toby ran quickly out to the shed, where he left Mr. Stubbs's brother to clean himself, if he was disposed to do so, and then hastened back to aid his friends in repairing the damage done.

To right the dishes, gather up the cake and bread, hide the butter with the telltale imprints upon it, and rearrange the scattered pieces of pie was not a long task. But after this had been done, Ben Cushing scolding loudly while he worked, the table-cloth yet remained, bearing the most unmistakable

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marks of the late conflict. Preserves, juice from the pie, milk and tea, told of Mr. Stubbs's brother's mischief so plainly that it seemed impossible to hide what had been done from Aunt Olive.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," Joe Robinson said, as a happy thought occurred to him. "Leander an' I'll go out to the pump an' wash the table-cloth while you fellers put away the dishes. Then your Aunt Olive will think we did up the work for her."

"But she'll know something's wrong, 'cause the cloth will be wet," Ben Cushing suggested.

"Well, that 'll be better than for her to see it the way it is now," Leander replied, "an' p'rhaps it 'll get kind'er dry before she comes out, for Joe an' I can hold it in front of the fire quite a spell."

Old Ben's face took on a purplish hue, while a queer, gurgling sound could be heard as he listened to the discussion, and Toby waited anxiously for him to recover from the fit of odd mirth, in order that they might hear his opinion on the subject of washing the table-cloth.

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"I'll go inter the other room an' keep your aunt there as long as I can," he said, at length, "while you boys fix up as well as you know how; but when she comes out here I shall follow her, 'cause I want to see the fun."

And the old man went away, his face so deeply crimsoned that Toby feared Aunt Olive would suspect mischief of some kind had been done.

"I wonder if we can fix it so's she won't know?" Toby asked, as the boys began hurriedly to remove the dishes.

"Well, if we don't, I pity Mr. Stubbs's brother, that's all!" Ben Cushing said, grimly, and Toby almost believed it would please the acrobat if the monkey was severely punished.

Leander and Joe carried the table-cloth out to the pump, while Ben Cushing and Toby labored with the dishes, each expecting that Aunt Olive would pop in upon him when he was least able to hide the real purpose of his work.

It soon became evident that Old Ben was succeeding in his task of detaining Aunt Olive in the parlor, for minute after minute went by without anything occurring to disturb the

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anxious workers, and, finally, Joe and Leander returned with a table-cloth that looked very much worse than when they carried it into the yard. It is true there was not quite as much preserves upon it as before it had been washed; but an additional quantity of foreign substance could be seen, although some of it was running off in tiny streams that trickled from the wet damask to the floor.

"I reckon we didn't get it so awful clean," Leander said, as he and Joe stood holding the very wet cloth before the fire; "but we've fixed it now so's she can't tell what ails it, an' Mr. Stubbs's brother 'll get out of the scrape, even if we don't."

"If we can only dry it before she comes out, I'm most certain she won't know what has happened," Joe replied confidently.

Toby, however, found no consolation in the prediction, for he knew Aunt Olive sufficiently well to be certain that such a sudden change in one of her table-cloths, and particularly her best one, would not pass unnoticed.

It was hard work to hold the heavy, steaming cloth in front of the fire sufficiently high to keep it from the floor, and many times

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before it showed the least signs of drying were the boys obliged to "spell" one another in the laborious task.

Finally Ben Cushing conceived the idea of having those who held the cloth stand on chairs, which did away with the necessity of raising their arms so high, and he and Leander were acting as clothes-horses when a loud, warning cough was heard from Old Ben.

There was no mistaking the meaning of that signal; but before any member of the party could change his position, Aunt Olive was in the room, holding up both hands in amazement.

"What *are* you boys about?" she asked, as she stood in the doorway, unaware that Old Ben was close behind her watching the scene as his face was reddened by silent laughter. "Why *have* you got that table-cloth in front of the stove?"

"We're dryin' it," Ben Cushing replied, while Leander looked so terrified that Toby fully expected to see him seek safety in ignominious flight.

"Drying it? What's that for?" and Aunt

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Olive spoke more sharply than any of the boys had ever heard her.

Then was the time when Toby should have given a truthful account of all that had happened; but he did nothing of the kind. Love for his pet sealed his lips, and, while he was hesitating, uncertain what to say, Joe Robinson replied:

"You see, we got it dirty, an' thought you'd be mad, so we washed it out nice as a pin, an' if you'd only stayed away a little longer you wouldn't know anything about it."

"Dear! dear!" Aunt Olive exclaimed, helplessly, having but an imperfect view of the "nicely washed" table-cloth, "you boys do worry me almost into my grave, an' it does seem as if you grew worse and worse each day."

"That's only 'cause they're growin' older, with a bigger capacity for mischief, ma'am," Old Ben said, stepping forward when he thought his presence might aid the boys in concealing the perfidy of Mr. Stubbs's brother.

"Well, I s'pose it is," Aunt Olive replied, much as if such explanation dispelled all her

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anxiety; but it is quite probable that the matter would not have been dropped so quietly if she had not had a very important question to decide, and needed Toby's advice.

Old Ben's presence prevented her from speaking with the boy in the dining-room, and, after many vain attempts to get him into the pantry unobserved by the others, she was forced to say plainly that she wanted to see him privately.

"I'll bet she knows all about the whole business, an' is goin' to have it out with him now," Ben Cushing whispered, and in fear and trembling the boys awaited the result of that secret interview.

III

THE SERENADE

TOBY was quite as much concerned about this interview with Aunt Olive in the pantry as were his friends. It seemed certain that it must be in some way connected with Mr. Stubbs's brother's behavior, and he literally trembled for the future happiness of his pet.

"Now, Toby," Aunt Olive said, solemnly, after she had closed the pantry door carefully behind her, "I want you to tell me one thing."

The important matter just then in the boy's mind was the mischief done by the monkey, and he endeavored to appease Aunt Olive's wrath even before she had given it words, by saying:

"You mustn't blame him so very much, an' I'll be sure he don't ever do it again!"

"Why, what do you mean, child?" And

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Aunt Olive looked down over her spectacles at Toby as if she thought he had taken leave of his senses.

There was no doubt in Toby's mind then but that he had made a mistake, and, in order that it should work him and his pet as little harm as possible, he asked a question rather than answered one.

"What is it *you* mean, Aunt Olive? Why did you bring me in here?"

"Oh yes"; and Toby breathed more freely when he understood by this exclamation that Aunt Olive's mind had reverted from his unlucky slip of the tongue to her own affairs. "When you was with the circus did you see where the fleshy lady slept?"

"In the wagon, I s'pose," Toby replied, thoroughly puzzled by the singular question.

"But didn't you ever know of her sleepin' in a house?"

"No, ma'am."

"Well," Aunt Olive said, with a sigh, "that's just what I was afraid of. She's so large I'm certain my beds are too small, an' I declare I don't know what to do with her to-night."

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With mind relieved by the knowledge that it was Mrs. Treat, and not Mr. Stubbs's brother, that caused Aunt Olive's trouble, Toby was so happy that he was disposed to go any length in calming her, and replied quickly:

"I never knew about her sleepin' in a reg'lar bed; but why not tell her that you ain't sure yours are strong enough, an' I know she'd be willin' to stay all night on the floor."

"Bless you, Toby, I wouldn't say that to her for anything. I was in hopes you knew something about it. All I can do is to put her in the spare chamber, an' then, if she *does* usually sleep on the floor, she can take off the feather bed."

"Then I wouldn't worry any more about it; but jest let things go that way," Toby replied, eager to return to the dining-room, lest she should question him as to his meaning when he made the hasty promise.

It was with a look of greatest perplexity on her face that Aunt Olive left the pantry, and the boys, who were anticipating all sorts of trouble because of the monkey's behavior, felt relieved when they saw her, for it was

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easy to understand, by the expression on her face, that her thoughts were very far even from such weighty questions as the soiling of the best table-cloth.

She simply advised them to fold up the wet damask "an' stop bein' so foolish," after which she left the room, followed by Old Ben, who evidently believed it was time for him to return to the parlor, much to the disappointment of all the boys, who had hoped he would, without further loss of time, explain to them the reasons for his visit.

As a matter of course all were eager to learn the subject of the interview, and after Toby had explained matters, the conversation turned to the probable reason for the coming of the circus people.

The visitors had been in the house two or three hours, and not yet a word had been spoken regarding what was evidently an important matter. Ben Cushing believed they ought to call Old Ben into the dining-room and ask him squarely why he had come. Toby would not agree to any such plan, for it savored too strongly of impertinence, and Joe Robinson took the same view of the case,

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while Leander believed he could bring about the desired end.

"I'll tell you how it can be fixed, boys, an', even if we don't find out the whole story, it'll show 'em what we can do. I'll run home after my 'cordion, an' we'll serenade 'em. Then when they invite us in we'll most likely hear why they've come."

Ben Cushing was so positive the guests were eager to enlist their aid in conducting a circus, that he believed it useless to take very much trouble to learn what they evidently already knew; but when Joe Robinson insisted that the serenade would be a delicate compliment to the guests, the acrobat decided in favor of it, stipulating, however, that he should turn a few handsprings by way of variety and to add a circus flavor to the affair.

Joe was disposed to believe the acrobatic efforts would be wasted, because by the time they were ready to begin the serenade it would be so dark that none of the feats could be seen; but Ben was determined to delight the new-comers by an exhibition of his skill, and the trifling matter of darkness was, to his mind, of but little consequence.

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"All we've got to do to fix that," he said, scornfully, because of his companions' lack of originality in such matters, "is for each one, except me, to carry a lantern, an' then they can see easy enough when I turn."

After these trifling details had been arranged, Leander went home for his accordion, and while Joe and Toby searched for all the lanterns Uncle Daniel owned, Ben Cushing went on a borrowing expedition around the neighborhood, for, according to his idea, the more illumination they could provide the more brilliant would be the entertainment.

Had the boys known that Old Ben began to hunt for them almost as soon as they set off to search for lanterns, the serenade would have sunk into oblivion, as had many of their wonderful schemes, for the chief idea in giving it was to learn from the old driver the reason of the visit. But of his desire to see them they were ignorant, and it was in a high state of pleasurable excitement that they met again with all which was considered necessary for the successful and brilliant accomplishment of the scheme.

Leander frankly admitted that he was out

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of practice, not having attempted anything in a musical way since the failure of their circus the previous summer; but he felt confident that at least a partial success might be made with "A poor, wayfaring man," provided the boys would watch him carefully and sing very loud when they saw that he was at loss for a note.

Ben Cushing was rather pleased than otherwise that the musical portion of the entertainment should be a trifle faulty, since it would give more prominence to his part. From the time the scheme was first proposed he had been rubbing his joints vigorously to get them in proper working order, and felt certain he could astonish the guests, even though they were "regular circus folks."

That their intentions might not be suspected, the boys made all the preparations in the barn, laboring under considerable disadvantage owing to the darkness.

Leander's proposition was to light the lanterns before setting out, and then, by making a long detour, go around to the front of the house, trusting to the chances of not being

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seen until they were ready to pour forth their melody.

This plan, however, did not meet with Ben Cushing's approval. There were many chances of their being seen while getting into position, and he did not care to run the risk; therefore he insisted that the lanterns should be lighted only when the serenaders were in the field opposite the house.

This plan was carried out, after some considerable trouble, owing to the difficulty they had in lighting a match while the wind was so strong; and, marching in a single file toward the house, Leander gave the signal to begin by sounding a single note on the accordion.

Then, with a volume of noise if not of melody, the serenade was begun, Leander's instrument sounding so feebly, as compared to the voices, that it made little or no difference whether he played correctly.

To the great surprise of the serenaders one entire verse was sung without apparently attracting attention from those in the dwelling, and, as they paused a moment to recover the breath which had been so vainly expended Ben Cushing said encouragingly:

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"Give it to 'em once more, boys, an' give it stronger. I don't believe they heard us then. Shout jest as loud as you can, and when the first one of 'em shows his head at the winder, I'll start my handsprings. That 'll kind'er wake 'em up, I guess."

The boys had been discouraged until Ben made this suggestion, but, cheered by it, they began again with such a *din* that the inmates of the house would have been unquestionably deaf if they had failed to hear it.

"There they come!" Ben shouted, when the window curtains were drawn aside, and as he spoke he began a series of handsprings which would have been bewildering if he had not fallen at every second or third turn.

The boys lifted their voices as high in song as was possible, while Leander worked at the accordion until it seemed certain he would fracture the instrument; but even this *din* did not satisfy Joe Robinson, and he decided to add a pleasing variety to the entertainment by giving an exhibition of his imitation of hyenas.

This departure of Joe's from the programme which had been decided upon, disconcerted



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the other performers greatly. Leander became so thoroughly bewildered that instead of confining his musical efforts to a single tune, he played a few notes of every one he knew, which had the effect of destroying what little harmony previously existed among the others.

Even Ben Cushing attributed his failure to turn as many handsprings as usual to Joe's howling, and when, after an unusually severe effort, he fell on his back instead of going over gracefully, as he had anticipated, he shouted:

"What are you fellers tryin' to do? You'll frighten everybody off, an', if the visitors have come here to get us to start a circus for 'em, they'll go away without darin' to tell of it."

Ben was angry, as his voice gave ample proof, and during two or three minutes it seemed as if this vast amount of circus talent would soon be engaged in nothing more entertaining than an ordinary quarrel.

Leander believed he had been wronged, otherwise the music of his accordion would not have been so completely drowned by the voices of his companions. Ben was dissatisfied because the terrible din distracted

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the spectators' attention, thereby preventing them from looking at him while he was turning his decidedly jerky handsprings. Toby and Bob complained because the serenade had degenerated into mere noise, and Joe was the only one who appeared pleased with the result.

It was when the performers had ceased shouting in order to learn what Ben was trying to say, that Uncle Daniel's voice could be heard, as he said mildly:

"Toby boy, unless you are happier making such a disagreeable noise than you would be in the house, I think it would be much better for you to come in here with your friends."

The boys were not a little ashamed, and a triangular quarrel between Ben Cushing, Leander, and Joe might have been the result if Toby had not suggested:

"Come on, fellers, let's go in as Uncle Dan'l says. It's no use to do anythin' more about the serenade, an' p'r'aps when we get inside Old Ben will tell what he wants us to do!"

Probably this was the only suggestion that could have been made just then which would

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have silenced the disputants. The lanterns were quickly extinguished, and, with the knowledge that the serenade had not reflected any credit upon them, the boys filed into the parlor.

IV

TOBY'S GUESTS

WHEN the boys entered the front room they found Old Ben in, apparently, a dangerous condition of suppressed mirth, and the others, with the exception of the living skeleton, were more or less amused.

Mr. Treat looked upon the serenade, discordant though it had been, as an especial honor to himself and his wife Lilly, and was eager to show some appreciation of it, more especially since his wife was so nearly helpless from having laughed so long and loudly that it did not seem possible she could interrupt him.

"My dear Mr. Tyler, and all your friends," he began, gravely, after he had assumed as striking an attitude on the hearth-rug as was possible for a skeleton. "Words almost fail me when I try to express the deep sense of obligation under which my dear Lilly and I

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am at this moment, because of the serenade with which you have favored us this evening."

Aunt Olive was not as familiar with the speech-making propensities of the skeleton as were Old Ben and Toby, and she hastened to assure him that there was no necessity to feel quite so thankful.

"Dear me, Mr. Treat," she said in a tone of deep concern, "don't thank these boys for such a howling as that, or you'll have just the same kind of racket every night."

"But he'll thank 'em just the same, ma'am," Old Ben growled. "Treat never loses a good chance to make a speech, an' he'd go through the same thing every night no matter how much noise they made."

"But he sha'n't to-night," Mrs. Treat said, decidedly, as she made unmistakable motions with her heavy body which told that she was about to get up from her chair in order to check the flow of eloquence. "Now, Samuel, don't make a goose of yourself the first day we are here."

"I won't, my love, I won't," the thin man replied, with an air of truthfulness; "but it surely does seem as if our friend Mr. Tyler,

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and his friends, should be feelingly and appropriately thanked for the entertainment of welcome they prepared for us."

"Well, you have done that already, and now give somebody else a chance to talk," Mrs. Treat said, as she settled back in her chair again, satisfied that this time she had vanquished her husband with her tongue so completely that there was no necessity for any bodily exertion.

The skeleton seated himself in one corner of the sofa with a sigh, looking, as he crossed one fleshless leg over the other, very much like a tiny pin on a remarkably large cushion. He uttered no complaint; but his face showed just how sadly abused he considered himself.

"The boys meant well, but they didn't know," Old Ben added, thinking it necessary to say all he truthfully could in favor of the serenade. "You see, boys, we've been so long with the circus that we've got kind'er tired of music, an' are ready to take the will for the deed—in fact, a good deal more than ready."

"We thought we could do it better'n we did," Toby replied, apologetically. "You

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see, it's been quite a while since Leander's played any, an' we didn't sing very well together. But all the noise wasn't singing, for a considerable of it was when Joe howled like a hyena, so you'd be sure to hear us."

"There wasn't any question about our hearing you, Toby boy," Uncle Daniel said, gravely, "and if, when you give another serenade, you confine yourself strictly to the music, even though you don't make quite so much noise, I think it will be more successful."

"That's what I told Joe," Ben Cushing cried, delighted because of Uncle Daniel's mild reproach. "I tried to stop him from yellin' so loud, but it wasn't any kind of use. He'd got his mouth open, an' nobody could shut it."

"That's the way I was goin' to do in our circus, an' I thought it was what I ought'er do here." And Joe moved uneasily in his chair as he was thus criticized.

"It wasn't really a terrible bad noise, Josey, an' you ought to be thankful that you've got such good lungs," said Aunt Olive, who always tried to soothe any one who appeared

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distressed in mind or body, and then she moved the little table toward Uncle Daniel as a gentle hint that it was time for the customary Bible reading.

These preparations had a singular effect on Ben Cushing, who coughed and winked in such a violent manner to Toby, that Leander was certain he had just been seized with a sudden pain.

Toby sat staring at his friend with an expression of helplessness on his face, wondering whether he had better ask Aunt Olive to make some effort toward relieving him, when Ben said in a hoarse whisper which could be heard plainly by every one in the room:

"You can't take a hint nowadays. Why don't you come outside where I can tell you somethin'?"

Relieved to know that there was nothing serious the trouble with his friend, Toby followed the acrobat into the dining-room, where the latter said, eagerly:

"See here, why can't we fellers stay with you to-night? The company 'll be sure to tell why they came, an' we ought'er be here to know about it. You ask Aunt Olive if

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she'll let us stop, an' promise that we won't make a speck of noise."

"I'll ask her; but I'm afraid she won't let you," Toby replied, thinking how slight were the chances that the request would be granted, for Aunt Olive was by no means disposed to endanger her furniture and bed-clothing by allowing a party of boys to sleep in the house.

Toby was undecided as to the best method of presenting Ben Cushing's proposition to Aunt Olive when she entered the room, ostensibly to see if the fire was all right, but really to assure herself that the boys were not in any mischief. Since she had had time to think the matter over, it seemed very much as if there was something about the soiling of the table-cloth which was mysterious, and she was determined to exercise more care in the future when young people were on the premises.

When Toby made the very trifling request that five of his friends be allowed to sleep with him, Aunt Olive was so surprised at the proposed wholesale visiting that she did not answer immediately, and Ben Cushing had

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an opportunity of urging her to extend the invitation.

"You see, the circus folks have come here for somethin', an' we want to know what it is, for we think they're goin' to start a show, an' have come for us to help 'em. Now, if you'll please let us stay here with Toby, we can find out all about it. We'll be so good that you won't know we're in the house, an' will behave ourselves better'n you ever dreamed about."

Aunt Olive looked down over her spectacles at the anxious acrobat for a moment thoughtfully, and then said, much as if she could not grant the request:

"All you boys couldn't sleep in one bed, an' Toby's is the only one left, now that the company have come."

"Yes, we can!" the acrobat interrupted, eagerly. "We'll sleep cross-ways, an' I've had more'n a dozen in mine."

Aunt Olive shook her head doubtfully, and Toby ventured to add the weight of his persuasion, owing to a meaning wink from his friend.

"We won't make a speck of noise, Aunt

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Olive, and you sha'n't even know the fellers are here."

"Well," she said, slowly and hesitatingly, "if your Uncle Daniel don't care, I suppose I can stand it. I will ask him, if you promise to go right to sleep, for I wouldn't have you here cuttin' up under any consideration."

"We'll do jest what you tell us," was Ben Cushing's eager reply, and while Aunt Olive had gone to interview Uncle Daniel on the subject, the acrobat tried to arrange some plan with Toby, whereby Old Ben might be forced to explain the reason of his coming.

Fortunately for the boys' scheme, Uncle Daniel did not make any objection to their remaining all night, and in a very few seconds after his decision had been learned, the five self-invited guests were running homeward as fast as their legs could carry them in order to obtain their parents' permission.

Bob Atwood was the only member of the party who failed to return, and it was very easy to guess that his mother did not have the same views on the subject of his sleeping with Toby Tyler and the other boys, as he did.

The remainder of the self-invited guests did

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not mourn his absence very much, however, owing to the fact that five would fill the bed comfortably full, whereas they might have been put to some inconvenience if there had been six.

When the boys were together once more, they found that Uncle Daniel had been waiting several moments, in order that all who were under his roof could take part in the evening devotions, and there was no opportunity for them to carry out any plans which they might have made for the purpose of inducing Old Ben to explain why he had come.

Aunt Olive insisted on the boys retiring before their elders did, and when they were in Toby's room all understood that they might as well have slept at their respective homes, so far as an early hearing of Old Ben's secret was concerned, for there was no hope of seeing him again until morning.

Ben Cushing bewailed their hard fortune in not being able to learn why the guests had come, and the others did their best at consoling him until the acrobat was quite himself again, ceasing his complaints as he joined with his companions in laying plans as to

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what they would do when the proposition to start a circus was really made.

While they were on this topic, the awkwardness of the band, as shown by his performance during the serenade, was commented upon, and, in order to show that it was Joe's fault, rather than his own, Leander got out of bed, proving his expertness by fingering the keys of the windless accordion.

Perhaps, if it had not been for this demonstration, the boys would have gone to sleep as soon as they were tired of talking about the brilliant prospect which it seemed was about to be opened before them, and the promise to Aunt Olive might have been kept.

But as it was, however, the sight of Leander seated on the side of the bed with his musical instrument, aroused Ben Cushing to remembrance of his failure during the evening. It seemed as if he would be failing in the duty he owed his companions and partners if he allowed them to go to sleep believing he could not do all of which he had boasted, and said, as he leaped to the floor:

"Now I'll show you fellers how many handsprings I can turn."

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"Don't do it!" Joe cried in alarm, as he intrenched himself behind a pillow and looked down at the acrobat, who was putting on his trousers. "You'll be sure to raise an awful noise, an' Uncle Dan'l will come up to make us all go home."

"No, don't!" Reddy whispered, hoarsely, and Toby would have added his protest if he had not thought it impolite to restrict the boys in any way while they were his guests.

"I can go around this room a dozen times without makin' a speck of noise," the acrobat replied, confidently. "I've done it at home more'n an hour at a time when father an' mother's been asleep, an' they never heard me."

There was no time for further remonstrance, even if the boys had been disposed to make any, for, with a suggestion that Leander profit by the occasion by fingering the keys as if he were playing before assembled thousands, Ben Cushing commenced to revolve.

If his parents had slumbered while he was exercising in his own room, they must have been exceptionally sound sleepers, for each time he struck the floor with his hands

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or feet the very building seemed to tremble.

In his anxiety to count the number of turns made by the whirling boy, Leander ceased to play in dumb show; the other lads no longer thought of anything save the skill their partner was displaying, and thump! thump! thump! resounded the heavy blows as the acrobat revolved, while his audience on the bed watched him in silent astonishment and delight.

Perhaps if Ben Cushing had contented himself with an ordinary display of skill, all might have been well, despite the noise he had made. But he was determined to outdo even himself, and, regardless of the fact that he had been twice around the room without a miss, he attempted to go three times.

After so much turning his head was dizzy, his mind confused as to localities, and he was not really capable of guiding himself.

He had made two revolutions on his third trip around the room, when, in some mysterious way, one of his feet came in contact with a small table on which was the candle, and the other struck the "band" full in the pit of his stomach.

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The table was instantly overturned, the accordion flung against the side of the room with a terrible crash, and Leander set up such a cry of pain as rivaled even Joe's efforts in his imitation of hyenas.

Ben Cushing had scraped the skin from several of his toes, in addition to hurting his leg quite severely, and, although not really crying, he made nearly as much noise as Leander did, by scolding him for arousing the household.

And the household *was* aroused beyond any possibility of a doubt, for the shutting and opening of doors could be heard, while footsteps sounded on the passages, and the partners knew that in a few moments at the most they would be called upon to say why they had not kept the promise made to Aunt Olive.

V

THE CAUSE OF THE VISIT

IT was Old Ben who first opened the door of the chamber from which such a terrible din had been heard, and, as he stood there looking in upon a scene but imperfectly lighted by the candle he held in his hand, it was only with the greatest difficulty he could restrain the laughter which was empurpling his face.

Directly behind the old driver was Mr. Treat, looking like a veritable skeleton in his fluttering nightgown, while on the stairs Uncle Daniel could be heard, as he tried to ascend and at the same time convince Aunt Olive that he was not exposing himself to any danger.

The scene in the room was comical. Sitting on the floor by the wreck of the table, nursing his wounded foot and scolding Leander, was Ben Cushing. Near the window lay the rem-

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nants of the accordion, looking very much like well-painted kindling-wood, and over it bent its owner, heedless alike of the acrobat's angry words and the presence of spectators, as he tried to gather up some of the fragments from which it might be possible in the future to extract what he called music. Sitting bolt upright on the foot-board was Toby, with consternation written on every feature of his face, awaiting in fear and trembling the result. Joe and Reddy had tried to conceal themselves, ostrich fashion, by hiding their heads under the pillows, as if they hoped by such course to escape Uncle Daniel's wrath.

"What is it? What has happened to the boys?" Toby heard Uncle Daniel ask, and the old driver replied:

"They've been havin' a lark, that's all. Now you go back to bed, an' leave 'em to me. I'm used to handlin' boys, an' I'll answer for it that they won't disturb you again to-night."

Uncle Daniel halted on the stairs, as if undecided whether to continue on or return to where Aunt Olive was calling loudly for him, and the skeleton hastened to take part in the

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subjection of the boys, by saying, in his shrill voice:

"Yes, yes, my dear sir, you had better return to your wife, and I will see to it that you are not awakened again."

"Sam-u-el! Sam! Sam-u-el!" was heard a voice from one of the rooms in a tone that demanded immediate attention. "Come back here this instant! Why it is that a man who's worth as much to a show as you are should take up with every chance to get cold, beats me."

"I think Lilly is alarmed and needs me," Mr. Treat said, half apologetically to Old Ben, and then he darted off in the direction from which the voice had come, looking not more than half as large in diameter as the candle he carried.

Old Ben coughed two or three times as if to choke back his mirth, and then, after both Mr. Treat and Uncle Daniel had disappeared within their respective rooms, walked gravely into Toby's chamber, placed the candle on the bureau, and shut the door in the most deliberate manner.

None of the party moved or spoke; they

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were both surprised and frightened by this proceeding, and waited almost breathlessly to learn what he proposed to do.

"Now then, Toby, I want you to tell me what all this 'ere rumpus means, an' you are to speak up lively about it, for I've promised your uncle that he sha'n't be routed out again to-night. You scared him an' Treat almost to death, an' I'm needin' a full an' kerrect programme of the whole affair."

"It was Ben Cushin', an' he's smashed my 'cordion," Leander wailed before Toby could reply.

"How could I help it? If you hadn't been sittin' on the edge of the bed like a goose, tryin' to play, you wouldn't 'a' got hit, an' I'd never been hurt so bad."

"Are you damaged much?" And the old driver's tone of assumed sternness was quickly changed to one of sympathy.

"Hurt!" echoed the acrobat. "Why, the skin's jest about all peeled off of me." And he held up his foot in proof of the assertion.

"If that's all's ailin' you, it don't amount to much." And Old Ben became stern again.

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"Now I want some of you to explain what started you out on sich a racket."

"Why, you see, I was showin' the boys what I could do, so's when you hired us they'd tell you how many handsprings I turned without stoppin', an' somebody—I guess it was Leander—must have shoved the table right in front of me, an'—an'—well, I hit it, that's all." And Ben Cushing once more devoted himself to the nursing of his foot.

"When I hired you?" Old Ben repeated, in astonishment, paying little or no attention to the remainder of the statement. "What do you mean by that?"

"Didn't you come here to hire us to start a circus for you?" the acrobat asked, in a reproachful tone.

On the instant Leander ceased to search for the remaining fragments of the accordion, and came close by the side of the bed. Joe and Reddy uncovered their heads in order to hear the reply distinctly, and Toby slid down from his elevated perch, as if he could not depend upon his ears alone for a full understanding of what was about to be said, but must also use his eyes.

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The boys had plenty of time to make all these preparations, for just then the old man had a spasm of silent laughter which threatened to shut off his supply of breath entirely.

"Wasn't that what you came for?" repeated the sore-footed acrobat, almost impatiently.

"Is that why you boys have been hangin' 'round ever since we landed?" Old Ben asked, as soon as it was possible to speak.

Toby nodded his head slowly, beginning to understand from the old man's mirth that they had made a very great mistake as to the cause of the visit.

"Well, I declare! I do wish Treat wasn't quite so much afraid of his Lilly, so's he could come in here for the fun." And Old Ben relapsed into another spasm, this time, however, controlling himself so far that it did not appear dangerous.

"Then that *wasn't* why you came?" Toby said, in a low voice.

"Now look here, my lad"—and Old Ben seated himself on the bed, where he could be comfortable—"you was with the circus awhile, an' I ask you squarely if you think you boys

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could start sich a one as I'd like to travel with?"

"Well—you see," Toby began, hesitatingly, and then Ben Cushing interrupted him:

"Jest you hold that candle where I won't hit it, an' let me show you how many hand-springs I can turn."

"Here! here!" the old driver cried, quickly, as Ben made preparations to turn. "Don't you dare start that racket ag'in, or I shall be obliged to take a hand in it myself. I promised that there shouldn't be any noise here, an' I'm goin' to do jest as I agreed."

"But I want to show you what I can do!"

"An' I don't want to see it—leastwise, not here while the other folks in the house are tryin' to sleep. Now I want you boys to tell me if you think you'd be able to start a up-an'-up good circus?"

Leander and Ben Cushing were very certain they could, and expressed their opinion in a decided manner; but the others, having less faith in their own ability, remained silent.

"Well, we'll say as how you can for to-night; but in the mornin' we'll go out where there's plenty of room an' see what's what."

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"Then that *was* what you came for!" Ben Cushing cried, rising from the floor quickly, regardless of his wounded foot, but, striking the injured member against a chair, he sat down again very suddenly, yet with a triumphant look upon his face.

"There's where you're makin' a big mistake, boys; I came here to get away from the circus, instead of startin' one."

"Are you goin' to leave the show, Ben?" Toby asked, in surprise, while the acrobat's face showed plainly the scorn he felt for any one who would willingly turn his back upon a real circus.

"Indeed, I am, my lad. I liked the look of this place when I first saw it, an' after meetin' your Uncle Daniel I made up my mind to settle down here near him."

"An' are you countin' to live here?"

"That's my idee now. Your uncle says he knows of a house that's for sale, an' it strikes me I shall buy it."

"An' are Mr. and Mrs. Treat goin' to buy a house, too?"

"Not they. You couldn't hire them two to settle down, 'cause they love to show

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themselves too well. They hadn't decided on where they'd live this winter, so I told 'em to come along with me, an' if I did get a place we'd all live on it till it was time for them to start out next summer."

Ben Cushing and Leander stared at each other while Old Ben was talking, and it could easily be seen by the expression on their faces that he had fallen very low in their estimation. They even acted as if having good cause for anger toward him, since neither he nor the Treat family had any right to come there and allow others to deceive themselves as to the cause of the visit.

Toby had already forgotten the hopes he and his partners had cherished, in the joy he felt that his very good friend was to live near him, and immediately began to ask questions regarding the proposed home.

Judging from what the old man could tell them of the property, which he had not seen but only heard of through Uncle Daniel, the boys decided it must be the Dick Rankin farm, and all, save Ben Cushing and Leander, gave their opinion freely as to the value or desirability of the land.

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Old Ben sat talking with the boys of his intention to leave the circus business and settle down as a farmer, during nearly an hour, and then, as if he had but just discovered where he was, said, as he took up the expiring candle:

"Why wasn't you young rascals abed an hour ago? Get in there this minute, all hands, an' if I hear so much as a squeak out of any one to-night, I'll come in an' make an aching example of the whole lot. Now remember what I say!"

The old man left the room on tiptoe, making fully twice as much noise as if he had walked boldly out, and the boys were left alone to mourn over the sudden blight which had come upon their hopes.

"I've a good mind to make an awful noise jest to spite him," Ben Cushing said, sulkily, but taking due care to speak in a low tone so that the old driver could not hear him. "He hadn't any business to come here makin' the crowd think he wanted us to go away with him."

"It wasn't his fault that we were foolish, an', if you're goin' to make a noise jest for

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spite, I want a chance to climb out of the window first, 'cause I wouldn't like to be here when he comes back," Joe said, laughingly; but way down in his heart was a big sorrow because his dream of imitating hyenas throughout the country was not to be realized.

"He might have told us what he came for, in the first place, then we shouldn't have thought what we did, an' my 'cordion wouldn't have been broke," Leander muttered, as he tucked himself in at the foot of the bed, using such a large proportion of the clothes that Reddy was left without any covering whatever.

"Well, now, I'll bet he'll be sorry for this before he's much older, and you'll be sorry, too, if you kick in your sleep," Ben Cushing said, as he laid himself down in an injured sort of way by the side of Leander.

Toby had not defended his friend as the boys fancied he should; but, nevertheless, he was prepared to make the acrobat and the musician regret having said anything against the old driver, and this he did by remarking, carelessly:

"I s'pose, if he stays here this winter, he'll

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have a lot of ponies an' things that belong to the circus to look after."

None of them had taken this view of the matter, so incensed had they been at what was only their own fault, and for quite a minute after Toby spoke there was perfect silence in the room, broken only when Ben Cushing, rolling angrily over, crowded against Leander until the musician uttered a cry of pain.

"Would they let him keep such things for 'em?" Joe asked, in a low tone.

"They have to board the ponies somewhere when it's winter, an' I s'pose they'd rather he'd have the little things, 'cause he's been so long with circuses that he knows all about 'em."

There was another long time of silence, and then Ben Cushing said, raising himself on his elbow as if it were possible to see his partners in the darkness and wanted them to see him:

"I tell you what it is, fellers, I was only jokin' when I said he'd be sorry for makin' us think he was goin' to start a circus. I only wanted to see what you'd say."

After that remark none but the kindest

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feelings were entertained for the old driver, and all thoughts of getting together a circus for him were forgotten in the discussion which arose, as to what portion of the show he would bring with him when he came to live in Guilford.

VI

OLD BEN'S HOME

THE boys were up next morning quite as early as if they had not been awake half the night talking about the wonderful things Old Ben would probably bring with him, and Aunt Olive administered a mild reproof to Ben Cushing because of his breaking the promise in regard to making a noise.

Uncle Daniel was too busily engaged with Old Ben regarding the purchase of the Rankin farm to spend much time talking of the disturbance caused by the acrobat's efforts the night before, and did not speak nearly as sternly about it as the boys had expected.

"I tell you what it is, fellers," Toby said, gleefully, when his friends went with him to get the morning's supply of water, "I was afraid Uncle Dan'l would be awful mad, an' we got out of it easy."

Ben Cushing was disposed to make light of

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what the other boys believed to be a narrow escape. He professed to have been certain from the first that it was not a serious matter, and actually insisted that Uncle Daniel rather enjoyed being awakened by such a commotion in the night.

After breakfast the "circus folks" called upon Mr. Stubbs's brother. The hair stood out straight and stiff from his head, causing Mr. and Mrs. Treat no little wonderment as to the cause of it; but Old Ben and the boys knew that the porcupine appearance was due to the preserves with which the monkey had besmeared his head when he leaped upon the supper-table, and the old driver had one of his very worst spells of internal laughter, while the fat woman was trying to understand what had caused such a change in Mr. Stubbs's brother's general appearance.

When this formal visit to the monkey was over, Old Ben and Mr. Treat went with Uncle Daniel to look at the Rankin farm; but the boys were not able to accompany them, owing to the fact that the fat woman seemed to consider it their duty to entertain her.

She asked so many questions about their

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attempt to start a circus that Ben Cushing thought it would be a real kindness to give her an exhibition of the part he had intended to play in the performance, and, while he was turning handsprings, Leander mourned the breaking of his accordion, which prevented him from displaying his musical talents.

Mrs. Treat appeared to be very much pleased with Toby's friends, and held a formal reception in the woodshed with as much grace and dignity as could be expected from one of her size. The boys were quite as well satisfied with her as she appeared to be with them, and showed no intention of bringing their visit to a close until nearly dinner-time, when Aunt Olive plainly told them that she would much prefer they dine at home.

All the boys, save Ben Cushing, acquiesced in this plainly expressed wish without a murmur; but he said to Toby as they walked toward the gate:

"Of course, if your Aunt Olive ain't wantin' us, we can go home; but when we was company that had stayed all night, I don't think it was very polite of her to tell us to leave."

Toby tried in vain to smooth his friend's

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ruffled dignity, and when the acrobat marched stiffly through the gate, closing it behind him with a spiteful "bang," it seemed certain to more than one of the party that he would never be "company" in Aunt Olive's home again.

It was not until dinner had been ready fully half an hour, and the nicely roasted turkey was growing dry in the tin oven, that Uncle Daniel and his guests returned.

The news they brought surprised those who had believed the buying of a farm required considerable time. Old Ben had looked at the property, decided that he liked it, and made the purchase at once, with the understanding that he should take possession on the following day. He had included the furniture in the house, as well as the tools and stock, in the bargain, consequently there was really nothing to prevent him from beginning immediately the new life he had chosen.

Much to Toby's sorrow the "circus people" moved to the Rankin farm next day, and by that time Ben Cushing had so far forgotten his cause of complaint against Aunt Olive as to be present with the other boys to aid in the moving, by his advice, at least.

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It was early in the morning when Old Ben took possession of his farm, with Mrs. Treat as housekeeper and Mr. Treat as general assistant, and he readily granted the skeleton's request that the first meal should be a feast of welcome to Toby and his friends, as as well as a thanksgiving that they had at last secured a real home.

It required no slight amount of labor to prepare a dinner for nine people on the first day of arriving at the new home; but Mrs. Treat bustled around as actively as if she had been simply an ordinary-sized woman, while her thin husband darted from one room to another in his efforts to help her, much as if he were moved by springs, which prevented any necessity for personal exertion.

The boys did what they could to aid, while Old Ben sat in one corner of the kitchen smoking his pipe and presenting a perfect picture of contentment.

"Now, Toby," Mrs. Treat said, when the odors from the stove told eloquently that dinner was nearly ready, "I suppose you'd feel a good deal better if Mr. Stubbs's brother could be here, as Mr. Stubbs himself was with

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us the first time you ate one of my dinners, so run right away an' fetch him."

Toby was delighted because of this permission, and when, in a remarkably short time afterward, he returned with the monkey on his shoulder, it could be seen that he had done all in his power to remove the preserves from the animal's head, and otherwise make him presentable as a guest.

Mrs. Treat had arrayed herself in the gorgeous attire she usually wore when on exhibition in the circus, which gave her enormous arms and face an opportunity to attest by their redness to her exertions in the way of preparing dinner. The skeleton's black clothes hung in folds around his thin frame, which was so valuable to his wife in a commercial sense, and he presented much the appearance of a clothes-pin which had become entangled with the clothing during a windy day.

Old Ben made no change of costume on this important occasion. Mrs. Treat had tried to persuade him to "dress up"; but he insisted that she and her husband were in such elegant attire that there was no necessity for him to appear in other than his working garments.

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Neither would he take the position of host at the head of the table, much to the skeleton's delight; he was perfectly willing to be one of the guests, even though he did own the farm, and Mr. Treat, with an ill-disguised look of importance on his face, proceeded to do the honors.

"Mr. Tyler," he said, with a grand flourish of his hands, while his wife was taking two roasted chickens from the oven at great risk of burning her fat arms, "Lilly and myself have often had the honor of your company at dinner when our abode was only a humble canvas tent; but now we have the excessive pleasure of inviting you to seat yourself, and your friends to seat themselves, at the festive board in the home of our old and mutual friend, Ben."

Considering that they had already been invited to dinner, Toby and his friends thought this late invitation rather unnecessary; but all behaved as if this was the first intimation that they were expected to dine there.

Toby fully believed the skeleton would make a speech before the guests were seated at the table, but in this he was mistaken,



MR. TREAT PROCEEDED TO DO THE HONORS

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though not disappointed. Mr. Treat was too hungry even for alleged oratory; he had had an early breakfast, and it was then so late in the day that he was eager to begin his one great pleasure of life—eating.

“What are you goin’ to do with the monkey?” Old Ben asked, remembering the ruin the animal had wrought at Aunt Olive’s table, and not willing that it should be repeated in his house.

Up to this time Mr. Stubbs’s brother had been demurely seated on the back of Toby’s chair, fully occupied with an examination of the lining of Joe Robinson’s hat, and quite overlooked by all the party save the owner of the hat, who watched with considerable uneasiness the destruction of his property.

“The original Mr. Stubbs has been a guest at our table, and caused but little trouble, therefore I think his brother might be permitted to take part in this house-warming,” the skeleton said, generously.

“I don’t want to break up any of the arrangements,” Old Ben added, gravely; “but I hold to it that, if he does come to the table, he ought’er be tied down so’s we’ll

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have a pretty good idee as to where he'll stay."

Mr. and Mrs. Treat were surprised at what seemed to be an excess of precaution; but the boys knew very well why it had been proposed, and Mr. Stubbs's brother was soon fastened by a stout cord, which extended from his collar to the back of the chair.

By the time this had been done the eatables were all on the table, and, even while the guests were seating themselves, the skeleton had begun the work of carving the fowls.

In due time Mr. Stubbs's brother was given a piece of bread, which he ate while forced to sit in a painfully erect position, owing to the cord, and but little conversation was indulged in by the other guests, so intent were all on appeasing their hunger.

The skeleton choked himself two or three times; but in such a slight manner that no one paid very much attention to the mishaps. His wife gave him several vigorous blows on the back, which relieved him, at the same time that they excited fears in the boys' minds lest the thin little man might be broken.

When the plump chickens were reduced to

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bones, however, Mr. Treat began to show signs of a desire to indulge again in a speech, without which he seemed to consider that no dinner would be complete.

"I think, and I think I may say my wife Lilly thinks so, too," he said, in a loud tone, as he waved the carving-knife toward his very solid-looking wife, "that it is not only proper, but absolutely necessary on this, the occasion of the first dinner in his own home, that our old friend Ben should entertain his friends with a few appropriate remarks."

"Now don't go to talkin' just when it's time to dish up the pudding," Mrs. Treat remonstrated, as she began to fill nine saucers with custard pudding of such a rich yellow hue, that Leander sighed deeply because he had eaten so much of the chicken as to render it impossible for him to do more than think of the dessert.

"My dear"—and the skeleton's tone was at the same time decided and affectionate—"it is exactly at this moment that remarks should be made, for while one is speaking the others can be listening as well as eating. Even allow, for the sake of the argument,

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that it is an injustice to any one"—and here Mr. Treat stood up with his hands on the table in what he considered a most appropriate after-dinner style—"it can only be so to the orator, and he will have an opportunity of making up for lost time while some one else has the floor."

"There isn't any call, Sam, for you an' Lilly to argue about my makin' a speech," the old driver said, as he pushed his chair back from the table in token that the pudding would be neglected so far as he was concerned. "When any one has been with a circus, man an' boy, for nigh onto forty years, as I've been, they don't know much 'bout speeches. All I can say is that, now I've settled down here for a steady kind of life, I'll be glad to see Toby's friends at any time, an' when they come they may do whatever they please, except to let Stubbs's brother get on the table."

Then the new owner of the Rankin farm put on his hat and walked out of the house, much as though he feared he might become involved in an argument with the skeleton if he remained.

"There goes as good a man, in some ways,

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as ever lived," Mr. Treat said, as the old driver left the room. "My Lilly an' I have struggled and struggled to make him a trifle more social, especially in an after-dinner way; but all our efforts have been useless, as you see now. I did hope that when he became the owner of such a farm as this he would try to cultivate a trifle more fluency in the art of talking; but he positively refuses to take on the polish of society."

Overcome by his disappointment at not having succeeded in educating the old man up to his own speech-making standard, the skeleton sank back in the chair, covered his face with his hands, and appeared to be making every preparation to cry.

It was too sad a spectacle for the boys to gaze at very long, more especially since they could eat but little of the tempting-looking pudding. Toby quietly stole out of the room, followed by his friends, and not until they were in the open air was it remembered that Mr. Stubbs's brother had been left behind, a prisoner in the chair.

VII

AFTER DINNER

IT was by no means the purpose of Toby and his friends to leave the skeleton and his wife so unceremoniously. The boys simply wanted to be spared the pain of witnessing the thin man's grief, and to such end sought the unfortunate one whose education had been neglected to such a degree that he could not make a speech.

Old Ben was found seated on a woodpile in the yard surveying his property with a complacent air, apparently regardless of the grief he had caused Mr. Treat, and appeared surprised to see the boys.

"You don't mean to tell me that you've left before Sam got through talkin', do you?" he asked, as he ceased his work of whittling into shavings a huge pine stick, and looked at the boys as if he could hardly credit the evidence of his own eyes.

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"Well, you see, he felt so bad about your not sayin' somethin' more, that we thought we'd come away," Toby said, in explanation, and the old man nodded his head as if in token that he could readily understand how unpleasant it might have been for them to remain.

"It's hard to see a man so thin as he is cry," he said, reflectively, "for it looks as if he might get drowned in his own tears, you know. Ever since I met Sam he's been at me to make a speech, an' I never could do it, though I'd hitch on to most anything I thought I could pull for the sake of pleasin' him. I knew he'd stand out for jest what he did, though I didn't think he'd start in so soon, or I'd slipped out before."

It did really seem as if the first day in the new home was to end in grief for all concerned. The old driver whittled in the reckless manner of a man who is sad, and the guests seemed to consider it their duty to share his sorrow with him.

Several moments elapsed before any one spoke, and then it was Ben Cushing who broke the silence. He had not given up all

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hope of starting another circus, and on receiving the invitation to dinner decided that he would broach the subject to one or the other of his hosts. In his opinion the time had come for him to speak, and he took advantage of it.

"I don't think it's much fun to hear speeches," he said, decidedly. "For my part, I like roast chicken without talkin' better'n I like chicken with talkin'." Then the acrobat looked around at his companions for approval, and, receiving it from Leander and Joe, continued, "Of course, Mr. Treat's a nice man, even if he is so thin; but you see folks 'round this way don't do very much talkin' at the table, 'cept it is 'bout what they have to eat."

"Yes," the old man said, with a sigh, "I know that fashion changes in different places; but, you see, where Treat's been livin' he's had things pretty much his own way, an', if anybody ate dinner with him, it was necessary to hear what he had to say."

"Of course, it was different in the circus," Ben Cushing added, promptly, "an' I think it would be a good deal better runnin'

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with one, than to come here an' be a farmer."

"That's what you think, eh?" And Old Ben looked up at the boy quickly, almost angrily.

"Well, anyway, it ain't such hard work, an' you have lots of fun," the acrobat replied, decidedly.

"Did you ask Toby about that when he got home?"

"It was different with Toby, 'cause he got in with an ugly man, an', of course, I don't mean anythin' of that kind."

"Well, I'll admit for the sake of the argument, as Treat says, that he got in with an ugly man; but I tell you, son, they'll all average 'bout alike."

"I'd like to try it, anyway," Ben Cushing said, defiantly, as he turned a couple of handsprings for the purpose of dazzling the old driver with his skill.

"Now look here, my son," Old Ben replied, slowly and impressively, "the sooner you get that idee out of your head the better. I've been with circuses, man an' boy, fur nigh to forty years, an' rather reckon I know 'em as

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well as the next one. When a circus comes into town you hear the music, see the flags, an' everything showin' up in the nicest trim; then it looks fine. But did you ever think that every one of the folks who make up the fine show had to ride all night, an' would give their old boots if they could crawl off somewhere for a snooze? They see the same thing day after day, an', knowin' how hard they have to work to keep it up, don't find any fun in it. It would take jest two days an' one night for you to get all that nonsense out'er your head, and if you don't believe me, ask Toby."

Toby was ready to give evidence in the matter; but Ben Cushing was not disposed to listen to it. He had his own views on the subject of traveling with a circus, and there was nothing that could be said which would cause him to change them.

"I wouldn't go with the same circus he did, an' even if I did, I couldn't have as bad a time, 'cause I'd start out as a performer, while he only went to sell candy."

"Yes, I'll allow that ag'in, as Treat says; but Toby was trained for a performer before

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he was through with it. You've got an idee that you're about as good an acrobat as they make, an' I'm willin' to allow you can turn a fair kind of a handspring, but, lad, the minute you went inter a ring you'd find out what was lackin'. Circus men ain't in no ways gentle with a boy who can't do what he thinks he can, for the generality of trainers believe there's a power of virtue in a whip-lash, as Toby knows."

Old Ben would probably have said more on the subject, distasteful as his remarks were to Ben Cushing, but just then Mr. and Mrs. Treat came out of the house. The skeleton had sorrowed over his friend's deficiencies as long as he thought necessary, and was prepared again to converse with his guests.

"What is the subject under discussion?" he asked, as he politely waved Lilly to a seat on a log of wood, and stood before the boys eager to display his eloquence.

"Ben Cushing was talkin' about goin' with a circus," Toby replied, and before he could say anything more Mr. Treat spoke in what he considered his most effective style.

"There *may* be professions as ennobling,

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but I have never studied into any which I considered as honorable as that of speaking to the public from the ring. In fact, you have here before you, in the person of my friend Mr. Tyler, an example of what may be accomplished by diligent study, and had he remained with the circus which first presented him to the public, I am confident he would have achieved greatness on one, two, or four horses. In the persons of my wife Lilly and myself, you can see how, by the use of a little judicious art to embellish nature, people may become famous. If you, Mr. Cushing, are thinking of—”

“Now see here, Sam,” Old Ben interrupted, sternly, “I won’t have you fillin’ young Ben’s head with nonsense. You know as well as I do that a circus life ain’t fit for a boy who’s had any kind of bringin’ up, an’ you ought’er be ashamed of settin’ it out different from what it really is.”

“Now, I protest, I do really protest, my dear friend, against your—”

“Samuel, hold your tongue this minute, and come here by the side of me. What do you know about the troubles of the business

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when you've always been a livin' skeleton at twenty-five cents admission, with me to take care of you?"

"But, my dear," Mr. Treat began, pathetically, "you know as well as I do—"

"Samuel!"

Mrs. Treat simply spoke the one word; but there was a tone in her voice which silenced the thin man effectually. He meekly seated himself by his wife's side, and there began to chew in a pensive way on one of the shavings Old Ben had whittled.

Ben Cushing looked at the skeleton much as if he would thank him for his defense of what he believed to be a worthy profession for a boy; but he did not give words to his gratitude, for, taking advantage of the silence, Old Ben continued from the point where he had been interrupted by the coming of Mr. and Mrs. Treat.

"I don't believe you like to work better than any other boy, young Ben, an' I promise that with a circus you'd find so much to do that farm-labor alongside of it would seem like play. When it comes night you can't go to bed; but have to perch on the box of

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a wagon an' ride till mornin'. After sunrise you don't stop to make up your sleep, for first there's the entree into town, then gettin' ready for the afternoon's performance, an' sometimes, after all that, you're lucky enough to get breakfast. When so much has been done, there'll be plenty to keep you joggin' till the show begins, an' then it's the same thing over again. Treat don't know anythin' about it, for all he has to do is stand up an' show himself. I've got nothin' to say agin circuses as a pleasure; but my tongue can run mighty fast when I see a boy who wants to travel with one."

"And you're right," Mrs. Treat added, decidedly. "Because people crowd around Samuel to see him, owin' to his bein' the only livin' skeleton, an' because I take all the troubles and trials on my own shoulders, he thinks everybody with the show has as easy a time as he does. But—goodness me! What *was* that?"

The fat woman's exclamation was caused by a sudden, startling noise which came from the house all believed to be empty. It was as if some one had shut a door quickly and

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then fallen over the furniture, for a heavy crash was followed by what sounded like human cries.

Mrs. Treat would probably have started up in surprise if she had not been so large that any sudden movement was nearly impossible; but her husband made quite as great a change of position as was necessary for the entire family. He had been comfortably seated on a log with one thin leg crossed over the other when the noise was heard, and in his alarm had tumbled completely over, where he lay unnoticed by any one, so intently were all gazing at the house in the expectation of seeing some person come from it.

"I went into every room this morning, and I am sure there was no one there then," Mrs. Treat said, with a very perceptible tremor in her voice.

"Please don't be mad; but I think it is Stubbs's brother." And Toby looked piteously at Old Ben and the frightened fat woman, as if waiting for them to tell him what to do.

"That's jest what it is!" Old Ben exclaimed, in a tone of vexation; "an' it does seem as if

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among us all we might have had sense enough not to leave him there alone."

By this time the skeleton had succeeded in getting upon his slender legs once more, and the entire party started at full speed for the kitchen, from whence the noise could still be heard.

When the door was opened and all had a view of the ruin wrought by the monkey, who had evidently freed himself by gnawing the rope asunder, Toby's heart was full of sorrow, for he feared his pet would suffer for this last act of mischief.

Mrs. Treat had left her bonnet hanging in the kitchen when she entered the house, so great had been her haste to prepare the feast, and this Mr. Stubbs's brother had secured as a prize.

The large bunch of flowers he had taken from the side, and with these tightly clutched in one paw, and four or five chicken bones in the other, he was dancing around the room with the bonnet on his head, chattering in delight. He had evidently caught at the table-cloth while capering, for all that had been upon the table was on the floor, the



MR. STUBBS'S BROTHER WAS DANCING AROUND THE ROOM WITH
THE BONNET ON HIS HEAD

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custard pudding being the most conspicuous object among the wreck.

During several moments the entire party stood idly gazing at the ruin wrought by the monkey, and then Toby, seeing that neither Mrs. Treat nor Old Ben made any effort to catch his pet, set about the task himself.

VIII

OLD BEN'S PLAN

IT was not as difficult a task to catch Mr. Stubbs's brother as Toby had feared, for the monkey was already wearied by his exertions, and, after leading his master a short chase twice around the table, he allowed himself to be made captive.

Mrs. Treat's bonnet was of very little value when Toby took it from the animal's head; its crowning glory had been the large bunch of flowers which Mr. Stubbs's brother utilized as a bouquet, and the custard pudding with which it was besmeared did not increase either its value or beauty. The wreck of the table was more complete than at Uncle Daniel's. Many of the dishes were broken, and such of the food as had not been otherwise destroyed, was trampled under foot.

It was not until Toby succeeded in rescuing the dilapidated-looking bonnet and had his

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pet on his shoulder, that any word was spoken. The boys were too thoroughly frightened by the mischief done to offer any suggestions, while the monkey's master strove in vain to decide whether his host and hostess were trying to keep their mirth or their anger under control.

"It looks as if Stubbs's brother was tryin' to break up the housekeepin', instead of helpin' it along, don't it?" Old Ben said, laughingly, and then added, in a graver tone, "If you ever want to make any kind of a respectable animal out of him, Toby, now's the time to give him a sound floggin'. Spare the rod and spoil the monkey is a good motto with them creeters."

"That's right." And Ben Cushing believed the time had come when he should give advice. "If it was my monkey I'd tie him up an' switch him till he couldn't move for a week."

Perhaps if Old Ben alone had recommended the whipping of Mr. Stubbs's brother, Toby might have followed the advice, although it is very certain the blows would not have been heavy, and would have hurt the boy quite

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as much as the monkey. But it was proposed by Ben Cushing, who, from the time the animal brought ruin upon the circus enterprise, insisted the little fellow should be flogged, therefore the punishment suggested took on a semblance of absolute cruelty rather than an act of duty. Toby might have been persuaded to whip Mr. Stubbs's brother "a little easy" in private; but to give the acrobat an opportunity of gloating over the poor monkey's suffering was more than the boy would permit.

"I'm awful sorry he's been so bad," Toby said, as he looked first at Old Ben and then at the skeleton and his wife, "an' I'll do any kind of work you say to pay for the dishes he's broke; but I can't have him whipped, 'cause him an' me think a dreadful sight of each other."

The boy hugged the monkey closely in his arms, looking much as when he was with the circus and it was himself who was in danger of a whipping, and Mrs. Treat could restrain herself no longer.

"He sha'n't be touched," the fat lady cried, as she took Toby and his pet in her

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enormous arms. "He hasn't done much harm to the dishes, an' as for that old bonnet, why, it don't amount to anything, for I was countin' to buy a new one as soon as I had time."

That settled the question, so far as whipping Mr. Stubbs's brother was concerned; but Old Ben was determined that the monkey should not work any more mischief in his home.

"Take him out in the shed, Toby," he said, "an' tie him up till you get ready to go, for I ain't sure as we'd have any house left in a little while, if he had his way about it."

"It's pretty near time to do the chores, an' I guess I'll take him home now," Toby said, decidedly, believing Uncle Daniel's shed was the only safe retreat for his pet. "I'll get Aunt Olive to buy a little chain for me, an' when I bring him here again I'll be sure he can't kick up any fuss."

"And you'll come again in the morning?" Mrs. Treat asked, as she kissed the boy with a resounding smack that was very like the crack of a whip.

When Toby went home, the other boys

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could do no less than follow his example, much to Ben Cushing's disappointment. The acrobat had decided to have a long talk with the skeleton about joining a circus, or starting a real one of his own, but could make no excuse for remaining after the others had gone. He was forced to take his leave, feeling, however, that he had good cause for complaint against Toby Tyler, whom he believed was putting on very many more "airs" than his position warranted.

Young Ben, feeling aggrieved with all his companions, would not even condescend to walk home with them; but went swiftly on ahead, thinking with delight of how he might get even with Toby Tyler when the skeleton and he opened a real circus.

During the two weeks that followed the feast of welcome, the new owner of the Rankin farm had no cause to complain because of loneliness. Nearly all the inhabitants of Guilford called upon the "circus folks," more from curiosity than a desire to be friendly, and Mrs. Treat found time for little else save the entertainment of guests. The boys seemed to believe Old Ben would feel person-

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ally slighted if they did not visit him at least twice each day, and were very careful to give him no cause for complaint.

Toby had called upon his old friends quite as often as any other lad; but had had no opportunity for a quiet talk with any of them, owing to the constant rush of visitors.

On a certain afternoon, when Old Ben had been so long an inhabitant of the town that he could walk through the streets without being followed by a crowd of boys anxious to see a real, live circus man, he surprised the owner of Mr. Stubbs's brother by making a personal visit.

The lad was in the barn engaged in an unusually long and monotonous task of husking corn, with Joe Robinson as a sympathizing assistant; and when Old Ben entered he insisted on aiding in the work.

"I always feel more at home if my fingers are busy," he said, when Toby objected to his working, "an' I've come down here simply an' privately to have a talk with you."

Joe Robinson had been sitting at some considerable distance from his friend when the old driver entered, but at this intimation

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that a matter of a private nature was to be the subject of conversation, he moved nearer the visitor.

"Sam's a pretty good kind of a fellow as the world goes, even if he is only a livin' skeleton," Ben began, so decidedly that Toby did not think he was called upon to make any reply, but showed that he believed the assertion to be strictly true by nodding his head.

"He an' I have traveled together a good many years," the old driver continued, "an' the only fault I ever had to find with him was his love for talkin', which is a failin' many besides Sam has got."

Toby could not deny either of these statements, and was sadly puzzled to understand why Old Ben should have come there simply to state such a well-known fact. Joe Robinson was disappointed; he had expected to hear something very interesting, instead of which the visitor appeared to have no other purpose than to sing a song of peace and good-will, with the living skeleton as the subject.

"Treat means well every day in the year;

OLD BEN'S PLAN

but there's a good many times when he don't know exactly how to hold his tongue." And Old Ben patted a slim ear of corn affectionately, much as if he intended it to represent his thin friend. "Well, now, you see, I'd like to give him a big time before real cold weather sets in, for when the snow comes he has to keep pretty nigh the stove. Not havin' any flesh on his bones, it 'pears as if the frost strikes right in, an' he has to live snug or he'd freeze to death."

Both Toby and Joe expressed their surprise at learning how sensitive Mr. Treat was to the cold, and the old man waited impatiently for them to conclude their remarks before he explained how he proposed to give his friend a "big time."

"Now you know I'm goin' to build a barn on my place, havin' bought the lumber an' hired men to put it up."

"But I didn't know you had done that," Toby said, surprised by what seemed to be very prompt action in the building line.

"Well, I have, for when I make up my mind to do a thing I don't fool 'round very long about it. They're hauling the timber

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to-day, an' it won't be long before it's framed. Now, what I propose in the way of givin' Sam a good time, is to have a reg'lar old-fashioned barn-warmin', same's folks had when I was a boy. I'll furnish everything, hire a couple of fiddlers, an' give the thing a good send-off, leavin' you boys an' Sam to boss the job. That 'll give him a chance to make as many as five speeches, an' then, if he isn't willin' to settle down for the winter an' keep warm, he's more unreasonable than I take him to be."

There was no more thought of husking corn that day. Toby and Joe believed Old Ben's plan the most brilliant that could have been conceived, and it was quite impossible for them to do anything save talk about it.

"I'm willin' to do whatever you an' Sam say ought'er be done, an' if you think your Uncle Dan'l wouldn't come if there was fiddlin' an' dancin', why, we'll leave that part of it out. But where I was raised they always used to have them kind of things at a barn-warmin', an' that's the reason I spoke of it."

"Oh, that wouldn't make any difference to

OLD BEN'S PLAN

Uncle Dan'l," Toby said, confidently; "he don't think it's wicked to dance any more'n he thinks it's wicked to fiddle."

"I'm glad of that, for I've taken considerable of a likin' to him. You see, a man can have confidence in sich kind of folks, 'cause he never corners anybody at dinner with speeches an' makes him pay for what he's ate. But when I say that, I ain't throwin' any reflections on Sam; it 'pears to be his nature, an', if it is, nobody ought'er blame him. Now I set a store on havin' your Uncle Dan'l at the barn-warmin', an' all I've got to say about the programme is that you mustn't have anythin' in it he wouldn't like."

"That 'll be easy enough," Joe replied, quickly, "for we can tell him all we're goin' to do, an' see what he says about it."

"No, I don't allow that would be jest the thing," the old man said, hesitatingly, "'cause you see it would be too much like ringin' him in, an' ef things didn't go jest right, he might think some of the blame was his'n. What I want of you is to fix up a time that he can't find no fault with. Then we'll have him come like a reg'lar visitor an' enjoy himself."

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"Could we ask Aunt Olive about it?"

"Yes, Toby, I don't see anythin' out'er the way 'bout that, an' I guess it 'll be the easiest plan. Kind'er talk to her on the quiet, an' let on that you don't want your uncle to know much about it till he gets there."

Then both boys were eager to discuss the details of the plan with the old driver; but he positively refused to make any comments or suggestions.

"All I'll say is this," and Old Ben spoke very decidedly: "Give Sam plenty of chance to talk himself out, an' fix things so's your Uncle Daniel will stay as long as the other folks do. You can invite the whole town, for the barn will be large enough to hold 'em, an' we don't want anybody to feel slighted."

The owner of the Rankin farm had accomplished that for which he had come, and, laying the ear of corn, which he had handled much as if it had been Mr. Treat, carefully on a pile of husks, he went home again, his weather-beaten face positively radiant at the thought of the pleasure he was to give to so many of the inhabitants of Guilford.

"Well," Joe said, with a long-drawn breath,

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after Old Ben had disappeared down the lane, "if this ain't goin' to beat a circus, then I don't know anything about barn-warmin's."

"It 'll be a big time, an' we'd better run right over and talk to Aunt Olive 'bout it. Then we'll get the fellers together, an' go up to see the skeleton."

Aunt Olive was very busy when the boys entered the house, and showed no inclination to talk with them until Toby said, excitedly:

"Old Ben's havin' a new barn built, an' is goin' to have a warmin'. We boys are to git it up, an' everybody's comin'. He's countin' to have a real band of music with two fiddles, an'—an'—it 'll be a big time."

"Mercy me!" Aunt Olive exclaimed, as she looked down over her spectacles at Toby, who had been talking so rapidly that he was forced to pause from sheer lack of breath.

"It's a fact," Joe added, emphatically. "Old Ben was just down here to tell us about it, an' he thought we'd better talk with you, so's to know what to do. There'll only be time enough to get ready before the barn's finished."

"A barn-warming!" Aunt Olive repeated,

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as if in dismay. "It does seem to me that I never had so little to work with as I've got this fall. There'll have to be no end of food, an' I know Mrs. Treat can't cook it alone. Now you boys fill up the box with wood an' then go right away, for there are so many things to do I don't know which way to turn first."

In Aunt Olive's disturbed frame of mind it was useless to make any effort at getting advice from her, and, after they had piled the box high with wood, Toby and Joe went to inform their former partners of the good time in store for them.

IX

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WITHIN half an hour from the time Toby and Joe surprised and flurried Aunt Olive by their information that there was soon to be a barn-warming on the Rankin farm, each proprietor in the former circus enterprise was fully aware of the important part he was to play. Old Ben had expressly stated that he depended upon the boys and the skeleton to arrange the details of the affair, and in the first excitement very little thought was given to the fact that they could not carry into execution any plan until it had been approved of by Mr. Treat.

Ben Cushing forgot, for the time being, any cause of complaint he may have fancied he had against his old partners, and at once assumed full control of the meeting, which was being held in the cellar of his father's store.

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"I'll tell you what we'll do," he said, when Toby had ceased repeating Old Ben's words, and just as he saw Leander moving uneasily as if about to make some suggestion, "we'll get a big piece of paper an' make out a bill of everybody who's to be invited. Then when the party comes off, them Colton fellers will feel kind o' sick 'cause they wouldn't give me the bantam eggs I wanted."

"But Old Ben said we mustn't slight anybody. He wanted every one to come that felt like it," Joe cried, growing alarmed at the readiness which Ben Cushing displayed in making a purely personal matter out of the barn-warming.

"Well, what of that?" And young Ben looked around defiantly, as if to ask who would dare contradict him when he was in the basement of his father's store. "He ain't found out what mean fellers the Colton boys are, an' if he had, he wouldn't let one of 'em come within half a mile of his farm."

"But it wouldn't do to leave them off the list without asking him or Mr. Treat," Toby said, very decidedly.

"Oh, it wouldn't, eh?" And young Ben

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was positive then that he had acted unwisely in being friendly with Toby Tyler simply because of the news he brought. "I guess I've got as much to do with this as anybody else, 'cause Old Ben said all of us fellers was to run the thing."

"But I s'pose he wants to have a little somethin' to say about it himself," Leander suggested. "If you're goin' to do just what he said we mustn't, I think we'd better go right up an' talk with him about it."

"Oh, I can fix that with him, or the skeleton, easy enough," Ben Cushing replied, confidently. "They'll have to talk with me a good deal before the barn's built, an' I'll tell 'em just what fellers mustn't be invited."

The acrobat's partners were by no means disposed to allow that any such grievous error should be committed at the very beginning. They had been commanded not to slight any one, and now, before the matter was fairly under discussion, Old Ben's positive injunction was in danger of being disregarded.

Leander's suggestion that they lay the matter before the owner of the farm at once seemed

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a good one, and, despite young Ben's objections, the meeting was declared adjourned to the old driver's home.

"I guess he'll think you fellers are kind'er weak if you can't fix a little business like this without comin' to him about it," young Ben said, as he walked with the others to the Rankin farm decidedly against his inclination. "The only way is to go right ahead, an' then when he says anythin', we can tell him how it was."

"I guess we're fixin' it the best way," Joe replied, with just a shade of sarcasm in his voice. "So long's he's footin' the bill he may think we ought'er do what he wants."

"You don't know anythin' at all, Joe Robinson!" young Ben cried, angrily, and then, by way of punishing his partners for not agreeing with him, he refused to speak again until they arrived at the farm.

Old Ben was in the field superintending the unloading of lumber, and guessed at once why he was honored with so many callers.

"Now, see here, Toby, I told you that I wouldn't have anythin' to do with gettin' up the party, except to pay the bills; so if you

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boys have come to see about the barn-warm-in' you'll have to talk with Treat."

All the boys save young Ben turned to go toward the house, where they knew the skeleton would be found; but the acrobat was determined to show his companions just how foolish they had been when they insisted on appealing to the old driver as against him.

"I told the crowd there wasn't any use to come here, anyway," he began, with something like pity because his friends had been so foolish. "Of course, if you agreed we was to get the thing up, that settled it, an' all we had to do was go ahead. Now, I said of course you wouldn't invite them Colton boys, 'cause they're terrible mean, an' you don't want to have anything to do with 'em; but the other fellers must come here like a lot of babies that don't know anything."

"Well, see here, my son"—and Old Ben spoke in such a fatherly tone that the acrobat felt positive he was about to be praised for his thoughtfulness—"I told Toby an' Joe that all I'd say 'bout the warmin' was that everybody should be free to come, an' nothin' done that Toby's Uncle Dan'l wouldn't

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agree to. Now, if you don't have any objections, seein's as how it's all I've got to say, perhaps you'll let things go my way."

"Of course we will," young Ben replied, promptly, and not in the least abashed. "Only I wanted to let you know about those fellers, an' then you could take your own risk in havin' 'em come."

"If I don't hurt them, I reckon they won't do me much damage," the old driver said, grimly, and just then another load of lumber arrived, which prevented him from saying anything more.

"Now it's all fixed," young Ben said to his companions, as if he had been eager to have it settled exactly that way, "an' we'd better talk with Mr. Treat about it, so's to let him know what he ought'er do."

There was a strong doubt in the minds of some of the boys as to whether the acrobat would succeed any better in instructing the skeleton than he had in convincing Old Ben; but they were anxious to learn Mr. Treat's views on the subject, and followed young Ben to the house.

The skeleton was busy helping his wife fry

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doughnuts, cut after the same ample fashion as herself, and when he came forward to greet them, holding one of the enormous brown cakes which he had just taken from the hot fat with a fork, he looked not unlike the pictures on a valentine, wherein a very slender arrow is attached to a very large heart.

"There, Samuel, I'll do the rest of the work while you attend to the company," Mrs. Treat said, after she had greeted the boys, and then took the fork from her husband, who was evidently intending to continue his work and entertain his guests at the same time.

Mr. Treat gracefully divested himself of his wife's apron, which had enveloped him completely, yielded up the fork, and with a wave of the hand signified that he was once more at liberty.

"We've come to talk up the barn-warmin'," Ben Cushing said, quickly, fearful lest Toby should get the advantage of him by speaking first.

"Ah, yes, yes, I was expecting to see you before the day had come to an end; but when I was called upon to aid my wife, Lilly, the care of seeing that the doughnuts were done

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equally alike on both sides nearly caused me to forget the important occasion," and Mr. Treat, thus recalled by himself to the duties of his official position in regard to the barn-warming, suddenly assumed a dignified air. "In fact, Lilly has just commenced to prepare for the festivities, and you can see on how large a scale by glancing over the uncooked dough which still reposes on the table. I think that a properly browned doughnut is a great delicacy; but when the cook neglects them until one side is of a light yellow hue, and the other nearly black, the most solid ornament of the table is spoiled. Now a doughnut—"

"But we wanted to ask you about the warmin', an' we've got to be quick, 'cause we'll have so much to do," interrupted Ben Cushing, who cared very little about the skeleton's idea of doughnuts, and was anxious to discuss that matter which he believed to be the most important.

Perhaps none of the visitors cared particularly to learn Mr. Treat's views on the subject of cookery; but all felt that the acrobat had been rude in thus interrupting the skele-

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ton, and would have insisted on hearing more regarding doughnuts if they had understood exactly how to bring it about.

"I hardly know as I have any suggestion to make just now," Mr. Treat said, in an injured tone, showing that he resented young Ben's rudeness, and, perhaps because of this fact, forgetting to assume his customary attitude. "I shall do all I can to aid in making of the affair a success, for I see that our old friend Ben has quite set his heart upon it, and I want him to have as good a time as possible. What have you decided in regard to it?"

Although the skeleton looked directly at Toby when he asked the question, Ben Cushing replied:

"I know pretty well what we ought'er do, an' don't you fret, for it 'll be done in style. I thought we'd come up here an' see if there was anything you wanted to do, an' if there was we'd fix it."

Mr. Treat looked rather surprised because the matter had been so entirely taken out of his hands, and then, turning toward Toby, he asked:

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"Have *you* thought how we can best make of the festive occasion a success?"

"No, sir. You see, we boys had only jest begun to talk it over when we came up here. After Old Ben told us about the warmin', he said we might ask Aunt Olive what she thought of it; but we haven't had a fair chance yet."

"That's the very thing," Mr. Treat replied, unbending from his stiffness of manner a little. "She knows the customs of the town, and won't be likely to offend any one."

"I guess she knows the folks in Guilford pretty well," Joe Robinson added, quickly, "for jest as soon as we told her there was goin' to be a barn-warmin' she started right in cookin', 'cause she said Mrs. Treat couldn't do it all."

"She's a dear, thoughtful soul!" the fat lady exclaimed, fervently. "I declare I didn't know how I should be able to get along, an' wouldn't have dared to ask her."

"I'll tell her how much she has relieved you, my love, for I and the boys are going over there now, to hear how she believes the matter should be conducted."

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"I don't see why you want to do that." And the acrobat spoke in a fretful tone. "We can fix this all up between ourselves, an' if there's anything you ought'er know, I'll tell you."

"Under the circumstances, and in view of the fact that my old friend Ben has himself suggested it, I think we had better confer with her," the skeleton said, as he began to prepare for the journey by muffling himself in a heavy overcoat, even though it was not a cold day.

Ben Cushing was afraid the barn-warming might take place even though he refused to extend a helping hand, otherwise he would have threatened to sever his connection with the enterprise if they admitted Aunt Olive to the consultation, because he desired to be looked upon as master of ceremonies and chief authority. But he was forced to follow the others or be dropped from the list of managers at once, therefore he stifled his anger for the time being with a very great show of cheerfulness.

"I don't see how these folks ever stayed very long with a circus," he said to Leander

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as they walked toward Uncle Daniel's. "They don't seem to know anything at all, an' I'll bet we sha'n't have any kind of a time at their barn-warmin', jest because Old Ben an' the skeleton won't let folks what understand such things manage it for 'em."

Leander was quite positive that young Ben referred to himself as one who "understood such things"; but since he was intending to ask the acrobat to help him with his chores that night, he thought it best not to take too decided a stand against the aspiring manager.

"I'll tell you what it is, Mr. Treat," Master Cushing cried, as he suddenly conceived a brilliant idea which he was certain would make a success of that which he had just predicted must be a failure, "the folks 'round here are great on circuses an' them sort of things. Now, if you say the word, me an' the rest of the boys will get up a little show in the new barn. We could give the whole performance at the warmin', an' it would tickle the people 'most to death."

"I don't think that would do at all," Joe Robinson replied, decidedly, and when Mr.

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Treat added that he "hardly believed it would be wise," the acrobat felt positive the warming was doomed to be a dismal failure.

"That settles it," he whispered to Leander. "They won't have any kind of a time, an' I don't believe I shall let 'em say I had a thing to do with it."

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AUNT OLIVE received the delegation of barn-warmers with proper courtesy, and, although she would have preferred that Uncle Daniel's advice, not hers, should have been taken, she gave them the full benefit of her experience in such matters.

But her ideas of what should be done, and more particularly in the manner of delivering the invitations, were by no means in accordance with Ben Cushing's.

She insisted that there was no necessity of giving each person a special invitation, since, if every man, woman, and child in town was at liberty to join in the merry-making, such fact would soon become known.

Ben Cushing urged that every one ought to receive a formal request to be present, either printed or written, and that such document serve as a card of admission. He failed to

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explain why he believed it necessary to require from each guest anything in the shape of a ticket, since no one was to be excluded. He simply knew that it would look more like a "regular time," as he expressed it, to have some one stationed at the door to admit the visitors, and insisted so strongly on this point that the matter was not decided during the conference with Aunt Olive.

There was one matter which sorely troubled the boys, who grew more and more excited as the time for the barn-warming drew near. This was that their holidays might come to an end before the building had been completed. School was to begin on the first of November, after which they could no longer give their undivided attention to the preparations for the entertainment, a fact which, in their opinion at least, would be a serious hindrance to the general perfection of detail.

"It ain't any kind of use to worry 'bout that," Old Ben said, on a certain day after the framework of the barn had been raised. "I've allowed that you boys an' Sam should manage this 'ere thing, an' we'll give the barn-

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warmin' before school begins, even if we're obliged to have it in the house."

The boys were confident the old man would do exactly as he promised; but, nevertheless, they watched the carpenters very jealously to make certain each did a full day's work, for, to their way of thinking, half the charm of the party would be gone if it was held in the house instead of the barn.

Beyond conferring with Aunt Olive, and giving his advice now and then when especially asked for it, the skeleton had withdrawn from the general direction of the affair. Again and again had the boys called at the Rankin farm for the purpose of having him decide some weighty question, and, on asking for Mr. Treat, been told by his wife that he was too busy to see any one.

At first but little attention was paid to Mr. Treat's persistent seclusion of himself; but when it became absolutely necessary to consult with him on the question of how many wagon-loads of evergreen they ought to gather in order to trim the barn properly, and he was then too busy to grant an interview, it became a very serious matter.

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"It ain't any kind of use for us to hang 'round this way waitin' for him, 'cause we've got an awful pile of work to do, an' won't be anywhere when the time comes if he don't 'tend out better'n this," Joe Robinson said, petulantly, as he seated himself disconsolately on a log of wood and looked mournfully at the collection of hatchets and axes the boys had brought with which to cut evergreens.

Joe was the most patient member of the party generally, and when he complained it was quite time the mystery should be investigated.

"We'll go an' tell Old Ben about it," said Toby, who was at as much of a loss to understand the skeleton's singular behavior as were the others. "P'r'aps some of us have said somethin' wrong, an' he's mad."

It was not a difficult matter to find Old Ben, for, from the time work was first begun on the barn, he had hardly allowed himself to be absent from the scene of operations long enough to eat and sleep, and within a very few moments after Toby suggested that he be consulted, the boys had told him their story.

"Kind'er puzzles you 'cause you can't see

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him, does it?" he asked, taking up a position where he could watch the workmen at the same time he talked.

"We was afraid one of us might have said something that made him mad." And Toby knew, as well as did the others, that Ben Cushing had certainly given the skeleton cause for complaint on several occasions.

"No, that isn't it," Old Ben replied, gravely. "It's somethin' considerable worse."

"Worse than gettin' mad!" the boys cried, as a horrible suspicion crept into their minds that the skeleton might be so deeply offended as to refuse to take any part in the warming.

"Yes, an' I'll tell you the whole story, though you mustn't let on to him or his wife that you know anything. It's been more'n a week now since he's kept himself reg'larly hid more'n half the time, an' it was three or four days before I could make out the meanin' of it; but one night while I was settin' by the kitchen fire, thinkin' 'bout what a snug little place I had, an' how much jollier it was to be here than on the box-seat of a monkey-wagon, I hit upon the answer. Sam's allowin' to lay himself out on a speech, an' he's been

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writin' of it all this time. I reckon it 'll be a heavy one, an' it kind'er worries me, fearin' there'll be so much talk that we sha'n't have time for the barn-warmin' till next day."

"But how did you know he was writin' a speech?" Ben Cushing asked, he having suspected that Mr. Treat had been practising some acrobatic feat which might eclipse the display he proposed to make.

"Well, you see, this night when I was settin' by the fire, Sam an' his wife thought I'd gone to bed, an' he was readin' to her what he'd written down," the old man replied, gravely.

"An' was it very long?" Joe Robinson asked, solicitously.

"Long! Well, I reckon you'd thought so if you'd heard it! As nigh as I could tell it was 'bout nine o'clock when he commenced, an' when I slid off to bed about ten o'clock he was agoin' it jest as strong as ever. I tell you what it is, boys, the more experience you have with livin' skeletons, the more you'll think about 'em jest as I do, that they've got twice as many lungs as other folks. Seems queer; but it's a fact."

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If the work of gathering evergreens had not been so important, the boys might have speculated at considerable length as to why living skeletons were so generously provided with lungs; but they were pressed for time, and could not pay proper attention to the matter. It was necessary they should have some idea as to the amount of trimming required, and Toby asked Old Ben for his opinion.

"Well, you see, I ain't very handy 'bout such things; but I reckon you ought'er haul enough in three or four days."

It was quite evident to the boys that Old Ben was not an expert in decoration, for, when they trimmed the school-house in the spring, one wagon-load proved sufficient, and surely they would not need more than twice as much for the barn.

"I tell you what it is, fellers," Joe Robinson said, in a tone of discouragement, "we'll get some to-day, anyhow, an' p'r'aps by the time we come back Mr. Treat 'll be where he can be seen. Toby Tyler must borrow his Uncle Dan'l's team, an' if one load ain't enough we'll haul in more to-morrow."

"P'r'aps one load would be plenty," Old

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Ben suggested, encouragingly. "You see, my advice ain't worth the askin' in such matters; but it's jest where Sam is strong."

The boys were quite willing to believe at least half the statement, and set off to harness Uncle Daniel's horse, leaving Old Ben at liberty once more to attend to his work as overseer.

So rapid was the progress made on the barn, that there no longer appeared to be any doubt but that it would be ready for the proposed "warming" before the vacation had come to an end. Every person in town was eager that it be completed as soon as possible, in order that the entertainment to be given by the "circus folks" might be enjoyed at an early date, and it would have been a difficult matter for the workmen to delay any portion of their work unnecessarily, so many were the eyes watching them.

Aunt Olive and Mrs. Treat had had but little leisure since Old Ben announced his intention of having a barn-warming. Both had worked incessantly, and, if the statements made by the boys were entitled to any credit, they had made the most elaborate preparations.

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Old Ben had contracted with Jack Douglass and Steve Powers to furnish music for the occasion, and it was expected the fiddlers would really fill the barn with melody, since they were rivals, and each would naturally strive to do his best.

Uncle Daniel had readily consented to be present, and given the old driver considerable assistance from the time work on the barn was first begun.

In fact, every one in Guilford was in the highest possible state of excitement regarding the affair, and Toby and his partners were called upon nearly every hour in the day for the latest news, nor were they unwilling to give the public all the facts in the case, for being questioned by their elders was decidedly pleasing.

It is hardly probable that there was any one within a radius of three miles who did not know all the details of the proposed entertainment, as well as the fact that every person, old or young, was invited to be present; but yet Ben Cushing insisted that some form of invitation should be extended, in order to make "the thing look right," as he said.

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While the boys were gathering evergreens Ben urged strongly that his advice be heeded in the matter. He was willing to abandon the plan of sending each one a personal invitation, for, on thinking the matter over, he had decided that it would require altogether too much labor.

"I'll tell you what we'll do, fellers," he said, in a most friendly tone, "an' if you don't agree to it the whole thing will be spoiled. I've kind'er held back while the rest of you was goin' ahead with other things, an' it's no more'n fair that you should do what I want. I'll fix up some kind of a show-bill, an' we'll hang one in the post-office, an' another in Mansfield's store."

As a matter of fact, Ben Cushing had been unusually quiet during three or four days just past, and there was not a boy who heard his pathetic appeal but that thought it would be only fair to give him some kind of a "reward of merit."

Under the circumstances, therefore, there was little question but that Master Cushing should do as he pleased in the matter, and, instead of continuing his work of gathering

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evergreens, he hurried home to prepare the posters with the least possible delay.

That he lost no time in his work the boys understood when they entered Mansfield's store after supper that same night, for there, tacked to the molasses hogshead, was Ben Cushing's invitation to the barn-warming, painted in red and blue ink on an old window shade. It was not really remarkable for the artistic ability displayed; but he had used a large quantity of ink, and it was possible, after considerable difficulty, to understand what was meant by the gorgeous display.

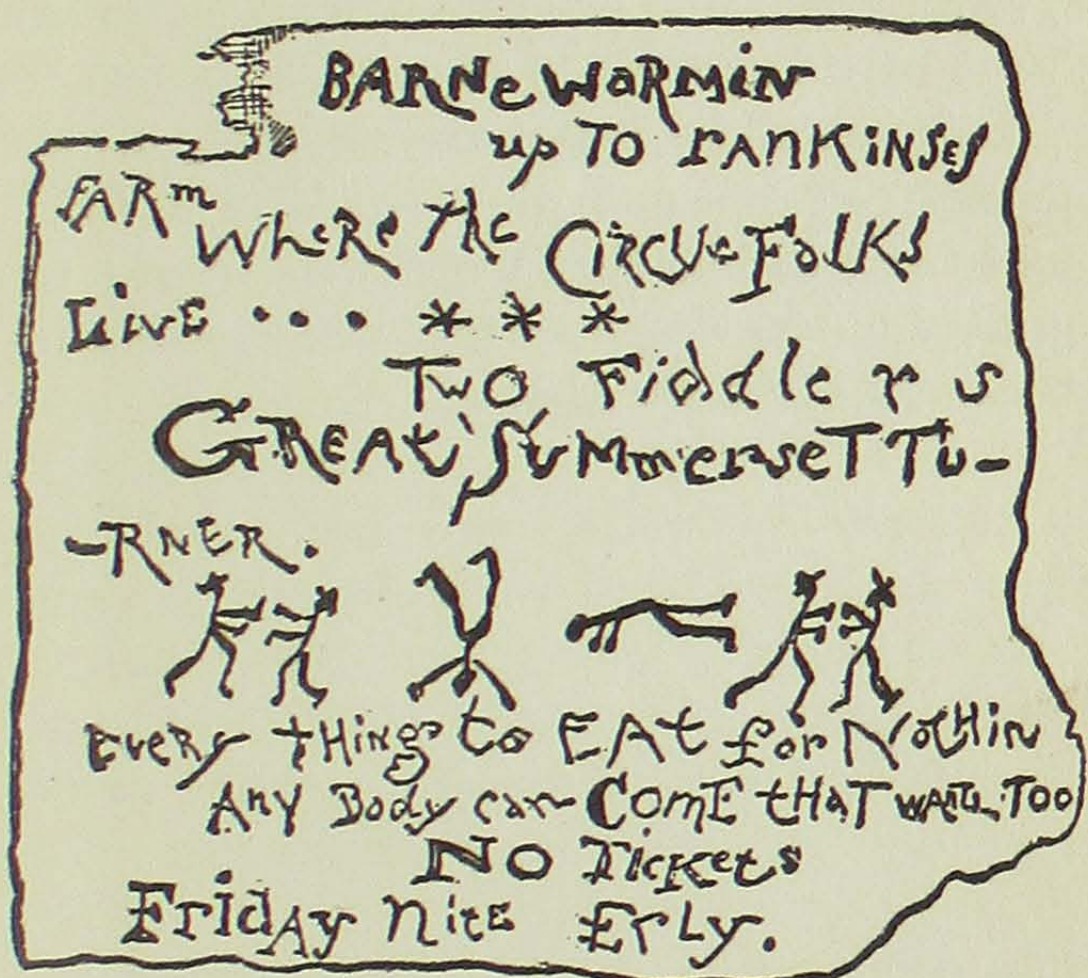
The boys gathered around the poster in very nearly mute astonishment, and Toby read the words slowly, while young Ben stood a short distance away fully enjoying the surprise he had created. It is not possible to display here a similar brilliancy of coloring; but on the opposite page is a faint copy of "the invitation."

Ben Cushing explained, after Toby had ceased reading, that he was the "great summer-set turner" referred to, and that the figures represented himself standing on his head, as well as in the act of turning a summer-

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sault, while those on either side were people running to see him.

"I ain't told you fellers one thing," he said, with what he intended should be a mysterious shake of the head; "but if you don't get



kind'er surprised when the show comes off, an' you see what I'm goin' to do, then it 'll be funny."

As a matter of course every boy was eager to know just what surprise young Ben had

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in store for them; but he positively refused to divulge the secret which made him appear, as he believed, a person of considerable importance.

"You'll see when you get there, an' then, p'r'aps, you'll find out that I know as much 'bout barn-warmin's as some other people."

This was all he would say regarding his intended surprise, and when the boys of Guilford went to bed that night they deeply regretted not having been on more confidential terms with **the** acrobat.

XI

THE DAY

THE Friday on which the barn Old Ben had built was to be "warmed" after the most approved manner, and by the aid of the skeleton and the boys, came finally, although the four or five days that preceded it seemingly passed very slowly.

The entire boy population of Guilford, and more particularly Toby and his partners, were out of bed so early that the sun would have been astonished at seeing so many abroad when he came up, if he had had time to pay any especial attention to the matter.

Those boys who were, in connection with the skeleton, to manage the important affair, did their morning's work so quickly that they were at the Rankin farm-house before any of its inmates had eaten breakfast, and, early though the hour was, they found the house-

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hold in a condition very nearly resembling deepest woe.

Old Ben met them at the door; but he made no reply to their greetings, and when they entered the kitchen Mrs. Treat motioned them to seats without speaking, while upon her face was the unmistakable imprint of sorrow.

The skeleton was seated as near the stove as was possible, and in an arm-chair so large that he would have been almost completely hidden, even though he had not been so thoroughly wrapped in blankets. On a stand by the side of the chair were several bottles and cups filled with various colored mixtures, while Mr. Treat's neck was so bandaged with red flannel as to make his head look not unlike the dried blossom on the top of a rose plum.

He shook his head sadly as the boys came in, and when he pointed to the wrappings around his throat it certainly seemed as if he were about to burst into tears.

"Why, what *is* the matter, Mr. Treat? Are you sick?" Toby asked, while the other boys wondered if the barn-warming would be postponed in case the skeleton could not appear.



"WHY, WHAT IS THE MATTER, MR. TREAT? ARE YOU SICK?"
TOBY ASKED

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"He's not exactly sick, poor thing," the fat woman said, pouring nearly a cupful of medicine down her husband's throat, as if she believed such action necessary to convince the visitors that there was something really the matter with him; "but he went over to the barn yesterday with only one overcoat on, an' he's got such a cold that he couldn't make a speech to save his life."

"It entirely prevents me from carrying out my portion of the programme," Mr. Treat said, sadly, in a hoarse whisper. "Just for the sake of pleasing Ben I've been burning the midnight oil, I might say, in order to compose such a speech as should instruct the good people of Guilford, as well as amuse them, and now see the condition I am in."

As he ceased speaking Mr. Treat, of his own will, drank a large quantity of several different kinds of mixtures, and then, leaning back in his chair, gave himself up to grief in the privacy of the enveloping blankets.

"But what's goin' to be done?" Toby asked, in a tone of mingled surprise and sorrow. "How'll we have the barn-warmin' if he can't speak?"

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"We are bound to have the barn-warmin', an' the folks must be disappointed if I can't cure him before night," Mrs. Treat said, as she busied herself preparing a new cough mixture. "Of course, nobody can blame me for not lettin' him make a speech if he doesn't get any better, for it might throw him into a fit of real sickness, an' I ask you what circus would hire a sick skeleton?"

Since none of the boys could answer this very pertinent question, the silence was not broken, save by the thin man's wheezing, until Mrs. Treat added, with an air of determination:

"Now you boys 'tend to whatever business you've got on hand, while I'll stay right here an' doctor Samuel. If there's any virtue in composition tea an' thoroughwort, I'll have him so's he can talk by night; but if there isn't, then I've done my duty an' the public must be disappointed. Don't run in an' out of here too often, for so much wind comes in at the door that he's likely to take a fresh cold every time it's opened."

"Come in once before dinner an' see how my voice is," Mr. Treat whispered, as he

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looked out from amid his woolly covering, "and rest assured that if man's will can accomplish anything, I shall not be obliged to ask you all to pardon me for the disappointment you would be forced to bear in not hearing my few remarks."

Toby was not just certain how much will-power a living skeleton might possess; but determined to ask Old Ben if it were in proportion to his strength of lungs. Motioning the boys to follow him, he said, as he went toward the door:

"I hope you'll be better by night, Mr. Treat, an' I'll ask Aunt Olive to come over an' see what she can do."

The skeleton made no reply, for he had retired behind his blankets again, but his wife said:

"I wish you *would* ask your aunt to come over, Toby. I s'pose I've done everything that can be done; but yet it seems as if we might hurry him along faster if there were two of us at work."

Then, with a parting salutation to Mr. Treat, which he may or may not have heard, the boys left the house, going directly to the

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barn, on the threshold of which Old Ben sat in a most despondent attitude.

"Well, Toby, it looks as if it was all up, don't it?" he asked, mournfully.

"Why? Can't you have the show 'cause he's got a cold?" And Ben Cushing asked the question in a hurried, anxious manner that was almost painful in its intensity.

"Oh, we shall have the warmin' jest the same, for he can sit still an' look on; but when I thought of giving the performance it was mostly because I wanted Sam to have one real up-an'-up good chance for makin' a speech where nobody would interrupt him, an' where his wife couldn't shut the poor fellow off. Now, jest when everything's ready, he up an' ketches cold till he can't even speak. It's too bad! It's too bad!"

"Perhaps his wife will have him cured by night," Toby replied, consolingly.

"I doubt it, my lad, I doubt it strongly," Old Ben said, as he bestirred himself sufficiently to look the boy in the face. "For all his ketchin' cold so easy, an' it seems to me he wheezes up if you even breathe on him, he's the most obstinate man you ever saw

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about gettin' rid of it ag'in. Why, he'd take cold from standin' too near a glass of ice-water, an' not come out of it for two months. Now anybody'd believe all that medicine would drive a cold through him in less than no time, 'cause he's so thin, an' yet it don't seem to have any more effect on him than it does on me."

"Has he been sick all night?" Joe Robinson asked, as if believing he might cure the patient if he could better understand the symptoms.

"No; so far as I know he was all right till he got up. Then he come down-stairs lookin' for all the world like a chicken with the pip, an' with his speech all written out an' in his pocket."

"I'm goin' to get Aunt Olive to come over an' see what she can do for him. She's awful good when any one's sick, an' I believe she'll fix him up before dinner-time."

"That's right, Toby; you tell her if she can jest get him so's he can talk all he wants to this evenin', I'll buy the whole 'pothecary shop, if she needs it to work with." And for the first time that morning something very

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like a ray of hope could be seen on Old Ben's face. Like Toby, he had learned to have great faith in Aunt Olive's powers, and almost began to believe that the danger might be averted.

While Toby went home the other boys visited the barn with Old Ben to view their work in the way of adornment, which had not been completed until a late hour the night previous.

Aside from the decorations, it was as substantial a building as could be found within many miles of Guilford. The carpenters had finished their work, and the smooth boards of the interior looked clean and white, as if having been scoured. The floor was made of planks that had been planed for the benefit of the dancers, and on the loft above benches had been built that the older members of the company might have an unobstructed view without being in the very midst of the possibly boisterous throng.

On either side, where the cattle were soon to be quartered, long tables had been built, on which the evidences of Aunt Olive's and Mrs. Treat's skill in cooking were to be dis-

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played, and at the extreme rear on the main floor was a platform for the fiddlers. Directly over this, on the loft where every one could see it, Old Ben had had a temporary staging erected, and he said as he pointed to it:

"I 'tended to that part of the work myself, for I was determined Sam should have every chance. There's where he was goin' to speak, an' I tell you, boys, his speech would have been a long one, if it wasn't anything else!"

"I'm pretty sure he'll be all right by night," Joe said, cheerily, and then he examined the decorations with a critical eye, for he was certain Aunt Olive could cure the skeleton in a very short time, and he wanted to be positive everything was correct before the orator should appear.

The evergreens were arranged neatly and almost artistically in the form of long wreaths around the sides of the building, and festooned from the roof until they formed a canopy of green. In the center, hanging from the rafters, was a large wooden hoop covered with tin, and on this were to be placed candles, while at every convenient spot around the

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sides of the building, lanterns would be hung. That the interior could not fail of being brilliantly illuminated seemed certain, for nearly every man in town had loaned one or more lanterns for the purpose.

Joe was satisfied with the inspection; he failed to see where he could improve on anything, or where it might be possible to add to the beauty of the decorations. Even Ben Cushing admitted that it was "all as fine as silk," which was the highest praise from a critical critic.

When Toby returned he brought the cheering news that Aunt Olive had promised to come as soon as the breakfast dishes were washed, and would bring with her a bundle of herbs in case the cold defied the composition tea and thoroughwort.

Every one appeared hopeful, and Old Ben was almost himself again, as, believing there was a chance the skeleton might yet be able to make his speech, he busied himself with trifling alterations here and there, more for the purpose of having something with which to occupy his attention than because he thought they were necessary.

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Once during the forenoon, as Mr. Treat had requested, Toby went into the house to learn the condition of the patient; but the thin man was so thoroughly occupied with taking the different mixtures prepared for him, and Aunt Olive and Mrs. Treat were so afraid Toby's entrance might have admitted too much fresh air, that he was forced to return to the barn no wiser than when he left it.

It was necessary for Aunt Olive to go home in time to prepare dinner, and on being questioned by the boys and Old Ben as she came out of the house, frankly admitted that she did not believe there were herbs enough in the country to restore to Mr. Treat his voice before evening.

"He isn't sick any more than a man with a bad cold would naturally be," she said; "but he won't be able to talk very loud for two or three days."

"I could have stood his bein' sick any other time," Old Ben said, despondently; "but it does look like reg'lar obstinateness for him to git so bad off jest when I've got everything ready to give him the one chance of his life."

OLD BEN

"He isn't obstinate," Aunt Olive replied, quickly. "He has caught cold, an' couldn't help it."

"I know it, ma'am, I know it, even if I did accuse him, an' I'm afraid he'll never git over the disappointment. It ain't that I want to hear what he'd say, for, bless you, I've heard him time and time ag'in when I'd rather listened to 'most anythin' else; but I did want to make it cheerful-like for him. You see, his heart's so set on makin' speeches that this was his one big chance."

"He can save the one he's written an' get it off at town meetin'," Aunt Olive suggested, by way of consolation, and then she hurried away to cook Uncle Daniel's dinner, after inviting Old Ben and the boys to come over when they heard the tin horn sound.

During the afternoon the boys were busy carrying from Uncle Daniel's to the barn the food Aunt Olive had prepared for the feast, while Old Ben attended to Mrs. Treat's contribution, and then, while Toby sat with the skeleton, the two ladies arranged the tables under the immediate supervision of Ben Cushing, who, in the belief that he was

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assisting, did very much to retard the work.

There was no longer any hope Mr. Treat would be able to speak that evening. In fact, the ladies came to believe their efforts to call back his voice were so vain that they had ceased giving him medicine, and he was allowed to sleep peacefully in his blanketed nest until the time should come when, carefully wrapped like a roll of wafers, he would take his place among the guests, a voiceless orator.

"I don't care for myself, Toby," the thin man whispered; "but it will be a very great disappointment for our old friend Ben, who, I realize, was eager to hear my speech."

And Toby could make no reply; before the sorrow of both his friends for the loss of that which he could not appreciate, he was unable to find words befitting the occasion.

XII

THE EVENING

THE boys did, after some hesitation, accept Aunt Olive's invitation to dinner; but they had neither care nor thought regarding supper. None of them were willing to leave the barn when it was nearly time for the guests to arrive, for so trifling a matter as food, fearing lest some of the sport might be lost if they were absent during five minutes or more. Then, again, there was really no necessity to go elsewhere for food, because there was such an abundance in the barn waiting to be eaten.

Each of the managers, save, of course, the sick skeleton, had made arrangements to have his evening's chores done for him, which left every one free to remain at the barn during the entire day and until the festivities should come to an end.

Not fully appreciating the sorrow which had

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descended upon Mr. Treat, they were, with one exception, very happy. The single exception was Leander. Never had he felt the loss of his instrument so keenly as when his partners were anxiously awaiting the coming of the fiddlers, and he fully realized of how much importance a musician might be on such an occasion.

"If Ben Cushing hadn't broken my 'cordion I could have played to-night, an' I tell you, boys, it would have made a big difference with the music," he said, mournfully.

"What could you do side of Jack Douglass or Steve Powers?" And Ben Cushing asked the question in a contemptuous tone. "You can't play but a little of three tunes, an' none of 'em would do for dancin' music."

"I'll bet I'd be able to play jest as long as they'd hold out, an' I guess I know whether anybody could dance by it or not. If I'd only thought of it in time I'd gone up to the cove yesterday an' borrowed Charley Sullivan's 'cordion. He's got a good one."

"So has Jim Carter," Toby said, innocently, never dreaming how much trouble this bit of information would cause.

OLD BEN

"Are you sure he's got one?" Leander asked, eagerly.

"Yes, 'cause he showed it to me the other day. It's bigger'n yours was, an' makes a good deal more noise."

Bob Atwood and Reddy Grant admitted having seen the instrument, and there could no longer be any doubt but that an accordion was within easy walking distance of the ambitious musician.

"I'm goin' down to borrow it," Leander said, decidedly, "an' you fellers shall see how much I can play when I've got anybody with me that knows somethin' about music."

This was a direct insinuation that Leander's partners had but slight knowledge of that art in which he believed he was so proficient; but it would have been of as little use to argue the matter with him as to have tried to persuade him not to borrow the instrument, therefore nothing was said, although Ben Cushing could not refrain from a very expressive gesture of incredulity.

"I'll be back before anybody gets here," Leander cried, as he set off at full speed in the direction of Jim Carter's home.

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"He'll break the thing all up if he tries to play while Jack Douglass an' Steve Powers are fiddlin'," Ben Cushing exclaimed, as Leander disappeared.

"I s'pose he thinks he's got jest as much right to do somethin' as you have, an' *he* tells us what it is he's up to," Bob Atwood replied; and the remark was silently approved of by the other boys as a merited reproof to young Ben for keeping his intentions secret.

The acrobat might possibly have made some remark in answer, which would have disturbed the harmony existing among them, if, just at that moment, the two professional and rival musicians had not made their appearance.

This arrival was such decided proof the festivities were about to begin that there was no time for controversy.

Old Ben was notified that the "band" had come, and he at once gave orders that the lanterns and candles should be lighted. He had grown somewhat reconciled to the loss of the skeleton's speech, since Aunt Olive suggested that it could be delivered at town meeting, and was quite as cheerful as the boys desired.

OLD BEN

Mr. Douglass and Mr. Powers were fully aware of their importance on such an occasion as this. Being sworn rivals, they could not enjoy each other's society as they might have done, but stood, silent and dignified, in the center of the barn, while Old Ben and the boys were at work.

When the illumination was complete the boys believed no such beautiful scene had ever before been presented in Guilford, and the owner of the barn looked about him in a satisfied manner. The two long tables were literally laden with dainties, and formed a pleasing bit of color amid the green decorations and white background of the building. The very lanterns seemed content with that which they lighted up, and burned unusually bright, while the candles flared and flickered as if eager to show how well they could dance even when there was no music.

"I reckon nobody can find fault with this 'ere arrangement," said Old Ben, as he stood in the doorway, where he could have a good view of the scene. "If it don't please the folks, all I've got to say is, let somebody try to get up somethin' that looks better."

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All this while the musicians had been standing in the center of the floor with their instruments under their arms, and Old Ben was forced to forego his contemplation of the scene long enough to show them the platform from which he expected they would pour forth their sweetest strains.

"It must be pretty nigh time for the company to come," the old man said, after the musicians were in their places, "an' let's you an' me, Toby, get Treat an' his wife out here, while the other boys stay an' take care of the things."

There was hardly any necessity of proposing this last task for the boys, because Ben Cushing had already taken upon himself the duty of guardian of the feast, by walking back and forth past the tables, and glaring at the musicians as if he suspected they had designs upon the food.

Satisfied that the others would keep watch over anything which the acrobat might neglect, Toby followed Old Ben; but when they were in the open air he understood that the old man was not as eager to summon the skeleton and the fat woman as he had appeared to be.

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"I jest wanted to say somethin' to you, Toby, an' so got you outside here alone. There's plenty of time to call Sam an' his wife. You see, this is what is troublin' me: I never had no kind of bringin' up, you know, 'cause I've been with a circus the best part of my life, an' I ain't jest sure sometimes when I'm in company 'bout what I ought'er do or say. Now, if it ain't too much to ask, I want you to foller me 'round to-night, an' when I'm sayin' somethin' I oughtn't to, jest kick we when nobody's lookin'. An' if I don't do what I ought'er, give me the hint. You see, I was reckonin' on having Sam near at hand, an' he could kind'er keep the brake on me; but he'll have ter lay sort'er snug, so you must do it."

Toby was perfectly willing to do this favor for his friend, but at the same time feared his advice or suggestions might be quite as far out of the way as Old Ben's ideas, and said so plainly.

"I'll take the risk of all that, my lad. You know more about such things than I do, an' then, again, you'll likely hear the folks talkin', when you can tell me what they say. If you'll

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stick by me, I'll warrant that we come as near out of it as anybody could expect."

"I'll do it," Toby said, much as if he was doubtful as to the result; "but I think you'd better ask Uncle Dan'l 'bout it, an' let him put you along."

"I'd rather not do that, my lad, for I don't want to let on to him that I'm such a fool. You can fix it all right if you keep your eyes open. Now we'll start Sam and his wife over, for both of 'em ought'er be there when the show opens, hadn't they?"

Toby was quite certain the skeleton and his wife should be present to welcome the guests, and he and Old Ben entered the house just as Mr. and Mrs. Treat had finished their toilets.

The skeleton had taken exceeding care with his costume, for since his voice had failed him he was obliged to depend almost entirely upon the garments for effect. An evening suit of black, fashioned with so much cloth that it looked as if made for a man weighing at least three hundred pounds, hung loosely upon him in anything rather than a becoming manner, while around his waist he wore the gorgeous

OLD BEN

belt that had been presented him by the members of the circus company. It was intended only as the crowning glory of his exhibition dress; but he insisted upon displaying it on this occasion that the good people of Guilford might see the honor which had been bestowed upon him by others, and also because it seemed to relieve the monotony of the black garments.

"I tried to persuade Sam not to wear his belt," Mrs. Treat said, as she saw both Toby and Old Ben looking at the conspicuous ornament; "but he does think so much of bright colors that I s'pose it would 'most break his heart if he couldn't have on somethin' besides black."

"It is a great addition to my costume," Mr. Treat whispered; and from the skeleton's manner Old Ben fancied that he and his wife might have had a rather heated discussion regarding it, therefore he said, quickly:

"Wear it, Sam, an' if there's anything else you've got that will spruce you up a bit, put it on, for this is one of the nights when you and I are goin' to do jest as we please."

"I think this is all that is necessary," the



MR. AND MRS. TREAT PREPARE FOR THE BARN-WARMING

THE EVENING

thin man said, as he seated himself by the fire and looked mournfully at the written speech which he would not leave behind, even though he knew he could not deliver it.

Mrs. Treat was adding a few unimportant touches to a toilet that could hardly be improved upon. The dress was the same she had worn on the occasion of the first dinner in the farm-house; she would have preferred a more gorgeous one; but had had no time to make it, and this was the least soiled of all her exhibition wardrobe. She had, however, purchased a new hat, being forced to do so by Mr. Stubbs's brother, and it certainly gave her a very startling appearance. It was an exceedingly small turban with a profusion of red ribbons and flowers; but looked so tiny on her large head that the effect was rather bewildering.

Old Ben decided that she had "got herself up stunnin'." when his opinion was asked, and since, with that important question settled, there was nothing more to delay them, the party set off toward the barn.

Much against his will, Mr. Treat was forced to put on his hat, gloves, and two overcoats,

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in addition to having the blanket wrapped around his head and neck, and even then he was not much larger in diameter than an ordinary-sized man.

Toby led the way, Mr. Treat being supported on either side by his wife and Old Ben, and when they entered the barn the musicians had sufficient forethought to play "See the Conquering Hero Comes," while the boys cheered until the skeleton was visibly affected by the ovation.

He waved his hand in acknowledgment of the compliment, and attempted to say something; but, since he could only speak in a whisper, his eloquence was wasted upon all save those who were guiding his steps.

The boys were quite as well satisfied, however, as if they had been able to hear him, and when his lips ceased to move they cheered more loudly than ever, while the skeleton bowed again as gracefully as his multiplicity of wrappings would permit.

Old Ben had decided that Mr. and Mrs. Treat should sit on the loft, where the older members of the company would find seats; but to this arrangement both had decided ob-

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jections. The skeleton wished to remain where every one could see him, and his wife was equally eager to be where she could see every one, therefore a rude platform was hurriedly erected near the musicians, and, with the air of some very important personage, if not really a king, Mr. Treat stepped upon it.

"This would have been the proudest evening of my life if I had not been so foolish as to venture out with but one overcoat on," the skeleton whispered, with a sigh, and Jack Douglass, hearing it, struck up "Come Down with Your Smiles, William Riley," which had the effect of chasing the gloom from the thin man's face at once.

When the music ceased, and nearly all present were looking toward the door in expectation of seeing the first of the guests arrive, Ben Cushing stepped boldly upon the platform and whispered to Mrs. Treat, who replied to him so confidentially that the boys at once understood she shared the acrobat's secret—was, perhaps, aiding him in it.

Young Ben talked with the fat lady several moments, and then, at the very moment when the first of the guests arrived, he left the

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barn as if he desired that all the boys should see him, and yet took good care that no one followed.

"Mrs. Treat knows what he is goin' to do, so why not ask her to tell you?" Joe Robinson whispered to Toby.

"If they don't want me to know, I won't ask 'em," was the reply, and from that moment the barn-warming held no charm for the boys other than as it served as a medium for the divulging of Ben Cushing's secret.

XIII

LEANDER'S MUSIC

THE good people of Guilford did not believe it necessary for them to wait until a very late hour before setting out to spend the evening. In fact, they were always eager to arrive as early as possible at any merry-making, and Old Ben had not long to wait for his guests.

In a short time after Mr. and Mrs. Treat were ready to receive them, the people came in real throngs, until the barn was quite as full as was consistent with comfort, and Old Ben began to feel anxious lest more should come than could get in.

The fact of the barn-warming would have been in itself sufficient inducement; but when to this was added an opportunity of seeing the "circus folks," there was no question of remaining at home. Every person in the town who was able to venture out-of-doors

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came, and each one seemed bent on having a good time, which fact relieved Old Ben of the anxiety he had felt regarding the possibility of entertaining them properly. The people did not really need a host, for there was the barn, the musicians, and the supper, which was sufficient for all purposes.

Aunt Olive and Uncle Daniel had been among the first to arrive, and, after speaking with the host and hostess, had gone into the loft, where they could see everything and yet be apart from the throng.

As a matter of course, each one who entered the barn paid his respects to the skeleton and the fat woman, and had this odd couple not been accustomed to a public life they would have been sadly embarrassed, so persistently did the people stare at them.

The fleshy Lilly was almost sad because so many were present, for she realized that she and her husband were on exhibition, but yet receiving no money for admission. The skeleton was in the highest possible state of delight. He very nearly forgot that he could not deliver a speech, and persuaded himself

LEANDER'S MUSIC

that he, not the barn-warming, was the cause of such a gathering.

"I really believe I have gained a pound since we came to this town," he whispered to his wife, when a lull in the arrivals gave them a moment's leisure, "an' yet I can draw just as big a crowd as ever. If I'm worth a cent, I'm worth five dollars a week more to the circus than I was last season."

Mrs. Treat made no reply, but there was an expression of pride in her face as she drew the blanket more closely around her thin husband's throat, to guard against his taking additional cold, when his value as a living skeleton might be woefully reduced.

The musicians did not wait for Old Ben to give them the signal to begin their labors; they knew from the appearance of the guests that the greater number were ready to dance, and both played the first few bars of "Money Musk" with such energy that the floor was cleared at once, while the young people took their places prepared for most active exercise.

Mr. Treat stood erect that he might "open the ball," so to speak, and on seeing that all

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were ready, he waved his hand in a majestic way to Jack Douglass, when the dance was begun.

And it was a dance truly; not a single step missed, nor an opportunity to add a few fancy ones lost, while the two musicians exerted all their strength at the bows, knowing full well that this evening's work would decide the claim of one to be called *the* fiddler of Guilford.

During all this time Leander had not made his appearance. Surely he had had time to go to Jim Carter's and back twice, and it was strange that he failed to return, for it was not probable he would willingly miss any portion of the entertainment.

The boys had just begun to discuss the possible reasons for his unaccountable delay, when they saw him enter the barn by the side door and make his way to the band-stand. His face was red, as if he had been taking violent exercise, and he looked in every particular like a boy who has labored exceedingly hard.

"Jim didn't want to let me have it," he said, in a low tone to one of the boys near him, as he held the accordion above his head.

LEANDER'S MUSIC

"But I stuck to him, an' now you fellers will hear what real music sounds like."

None of the boys thought for an instant of interfering with Leander then, for it was not supposed he would attempt anything until the musicians began a new tune; but Toby decided that he would appeal to Old Ben as soon as the first dance was ended, for he feared the result if Master Leighton should try to play while Jack Douglass and Steve Powers were settling the question of supremacy.

But such delay on Toby's part was fatal, so far as a successful winding up of "Money Musk" was concerned. Leander had perfect confidence in his ability to play skilfully on the accordion, and was determined to surprise the company by his melodies before Ben Cushing should have an opportunity of carrying out whatever he had secretly planned.

The amateur musician had but little difficulty in making his way to where the fiddlers were seated, and then he mounted the platform unobserved by any save his partners.

It was when the rivals were plying their bows with the greatest energy, each beat-

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ing time with his foot, and Jack Douglass just a trifle ahead of his adversary, that Leander decided the moment had come when he should make his musical talent known to all.

Raising Jim Carter's accordion high above his head in order to fill it with wind, Master Leighton brought it down with a clash of confused notes that caused the regular musicians to leap from their chairs as if a bomb had exploded close beside them.

As a matter of course, the dancing stopped immediately the music did; but Leander was not disconcerted. He appeared to enjoy fully the sensation he was causing, and during the few moments when every one was too much astonished to be able to do anything toward suppressing him, he played a little of each of his favorite tunes, although it might have been difficult even for him to have said where one began or another ended.

With his eyes fixed upon the instrument, Master Leighton played energetically, evidently accepting the sudden silence which had come upon the company as a tribute paid to his skill, until Jack Douglass, angry at being interrupted when he was at least

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two beats ahead of his adversary, seized the boy roughly by the ear and marched him to the door.

"There!" he exclaimed, as he pushed the amateur musician several paces from him; "if you've *got* to make such a racket, go out-of-doors where you won't disturb folks!"

Poor Leander! He was thoroughly discouraged, having believed he had been getting along finely, creating quite a sensation, and to be treated so roughly after having had such hard work to get the accordion! He no longer yearned to play anything; but, seating himself on a pile of logs, was about to give free vent to his sorrow when Toby and Joe appeared.

They by no means approved of his style of music, nor of the time when he had chosen to give it; but both were sorry to see one of their brother managers put out of the barn while every other person was having an enjoyable time.

"Don't feel bad about it, Leander," Toby said, sympathizingly. "Hide the 'cordion under the shed an' come back."

"Jack Douglass hadn't any right to put

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me out like that," Leander wailed, and by the tremor of his voice the sympathizing lads knew that the tears were very near his eyelids. "I guess I've got as much business to play in there as he has."

"Well, I don't know about that, Leander, 'cause you see they were hired, an' are reg'lar fiddlers," Joe said, kindly but firmly. "You didn't have any right to play while the folks were dancin', an' when you didn't know the tune."

"You don't know the tune, either," retorted the unhappy musician. "You can't tell but that I played it right, an' he was the one who went wrong."

Joe could make no answer to such an argument. He felt reasonably certain Jack Douglass had played correctly, and that Leander was in the wrong; but, as a matter of fact, he could not contradict his friend, owing to his ignorance of music, therefore contented himself by saying:

"I never heard 'Money Musk,' or anything else, played the way you played it."

"That's 'cause you don't know anythin' 'bout such things."

LEANDER'S MUSIC

Joe believed Leander was positively ungrateful to talk in such a strain when he had come to sympathize with him, and walked quickly back into the barn almost angry.

"Hide the 'cordion, an' come in," Toby urged.

"I won't never go back there, 'less I should make up my mind to walk Jack Douglass out the same way he did me."

"But you can't do that, an', besides, you ought to remember that he lent us his horse when we was goin' to have our circus."

"I don't care if he did. The old thing was blind, an' he wasn't no good, anyhow."

"But if you stay out here you won't get any supper, nor see what it is Ben Cushing's goin' to do."

This last reason why he should return to the barn was so powerful that Leander showed signs of relenting, and, seeing it, Toby led him to the shed, where a hiding-place was soon found for Jim Carter's accordion.

When the boys entered the barn again the fiddlers were playing "Fisher's Hornpipe," and no one appeared to notice their entrance. Mr. Treat was leaning back amid the folds

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of the blanket in silent ecstasy, while his wife was quivering all over like a huge bowl of jelly, so great was her desire to dance.

"I was jest lookin' for you, Toby," Old Ben said, as the boys would have joined their partners in the far corner of the barn. "Come over here near the door while I tell you something."

The old man was having one of his very worst laughing spasms, as might have been understood by the purple hue of his face, and it was only with the greatest difficulty he could refrain from speaking until they were comparatively alone even amid the throng.

"What do you think?" the old driver asked, his voice choked by laughter, when he had led Toby and Leander to a deserted corner where there was no possibility they could be overheard by the merry-makers. "Sam's wife has been teasin' me to get up an' dance with her." And the old man gave way once more to silent mirth.

"What did you tell her?"

"I said right out that I would jest as soon think of goin' inter the ring an' doin' an act with one of the elephants, as to get up on

LEANDER'S MUSIC

the floor with her. You see, when I spoke that way 'bout her size it kind'er tickled her, for I never saw a fat woman in my life who was quite so proud of her flesh as is Mrs. Treat."

"It's too bad she can't dance, if she wants to." And Toby looked at the enormous Lilly as if he would have invited her himself but for his ignorance of the art.

"Well, if you think so, s'pose you look 'round an' see if you can't find somebody who'll run the risk of tryin' it with her. Do it, an' I'll stand back here an' see the fun."

Toby was still looking at Mrs. Treat, and, observing the boy, she beckoned to him.

"Go on, Toby," Old Ben said, laughingly, "she wants you; but don't take any risks, by lettin' her coax you on the floor."

"There isn't any danger of that," was the boy's reply, as he walked away, while the owner of the farm and Leander watched him as if they were afraid he might do something rash.

"Toby," Mrs. Treat said, when the boy stood before her, "I want you to tell the fiddlers to stop playing after this dance, until—well, tell them to stop awhile."

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"Why, what's that for?" the boy asked, in surprise.

"Tell them, an' then you will see," Mrs. Treat replied, with a meaning smile.

"Is it 'cause Ben Cushing is comin' on now?"

"You'll see," was all the fat lady would say, and, after Toby had whispered to both Jack Douglass and Steve Powers, he beckoned his friends over to the corner where Old Ben and Leander still remained.

"Mrs. Treat asked me to tell the fiddlers to stop for a little while after this tune," he said, excitedly, "an' I'm sure now's the time when Ben Cushing's comin' in."

The boys were positive Old Ben knew what young Ben's secret was; but his surprise when he learned that the acrobat was about to give some kind of a performance was so genuine, there could be no doubt but that he was quite as ignorant as they.

"I s'pose it's something he's fixed up with Mrs. Treat," the old driver said, "an' we shall soon know what it is."

At this moment the music ceased. The time had come for the acrobat to make his appearance.

XIV

BEN CUSHING'S SECRET

BY enlisting Mrs. Treat in his project, Ben Cushing was certain of attracting considerable attention when he made his entrance, if at no other time, for she of all others would best know how to make his coming most effective.

When the music ceased, and there was no token that it would begin again until after some diversion, probably in the nature of a surprise, the guests looked alternately at the circus people and the door in anxious expectancy.

No person was disappointed by not being surprised. The general belief had been that either Mr. Treat or Old Ben was about to deliver an address of welcome. But, instead of hearing a speech, the startled guests saw what appeared to be some small portion of a regular circus dart in through the door, and

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begin a most confusing exhibition of summersaults, handsprings, and realistic falling.

It was "ground and lofty tumbling," as the circus posters would have stated, mingled with many hard knocks as the performer came in violent contact with the smooth planks of the floor.

There could be no doubt but that this revolving, tumbling object was Ben Cushing, and if his costume was a surprise to the majority of the barn-warmers, it literally bewildered his partners. It was a genuine circus garb, as they all realized; but where he procured it they could not even guess. The tights had evidently been made for a taller person than young Ben, but this defect was remedied by pinning them over in wide folds, which gave him the appearance of being hooped.

The gorgeous, gilt-spangled trousers with legs hardly more than two inches in length, were as much too small for him as the tights were too long; but these had been securely tied around his waist with a stout rope, which did not add to the general beauty of the costume.



NOBLE
LIVES

WHAT APPEARED TO BE SOME SMALL PORTION OF A REGULAR
CIRCUS DARTED IN THROUGH THE DOOR

BEN CUSHING'S SECRET

"It's an old suit of Sam's!" Old Ben cried, when he had recovered from one of his internal laughing-spells sufficiently to speak, and then the boys understood why it had been necessary to use the pins and the rope.

During fully five minutes young Ben tumbled recklessly about, striking the floor with his head several times so hard that his mother started to her feet in alarm, fearing he had injured himself, and then, almost breathless and perspiring profusely, he began preparations for that acrobatic feat which he believed would dazzle the assembled company.

Running up the stairs leading to the loft, he took his station on the very edge of the scaffolding, near where protruded from the cross-timber a stout wooden peg, which had been inserted there as a support for harness.

It was so plainly evident he intended to leap from this lofty perch, attempting to throw a summersault in the air, that Mrs. Cushing was seriously alarmed lest her son might break his neck, and started toward him as she cried, frantically:

"Don't do that, Benny, don't try to do it, for you'll surely kill yourself!"

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But the acrobat was willing to take some desperate chances if thereby he might establish his claim to great skill, and balanced himself on the beam, clutching the peg while he measured the distance with his eyes before making the final leap.

By this time young Ben's father and Uncle Daniel were running toward him, and he must have understood that it would be necessary to make haste if he intended to startle the company. His partners were gazing at him in terror and surprise, wondering, at the same time they trembled for his safety, why they had never discovered before that he was a skilled acrobat.

There was no time to lose if Ben really intended to perform the feat, which would surely result in a hard thump on the floor if nothing worse, for his father and Uncle Daniel were close upon him, and he mentally braced himself for the effort.

Perhaps his courage failed him at the last moment, or it may have been that he was not exactly in the proper position, for he moved a few inches to the right, and then attempted to leap.

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His intentions were good, but the rope around his waist hampered him sadly, for it caught on the peg, which had been inserted in the timber at an angle, and instead of turning a summersault in the air, or falling upon the hard floor, he found himself suspended against the post like a crab hung up to dry.

It was useless for the acrobat to struggle. The cord was sufficiently strong to sustain the weight of at least two boys, and he could not get hold of the peg. He was forced to hang there until some one should come to his aid, and it was by no means a pleasant ending to what he had hoped would be the most successful exhibition he had ever given.

Young Ben's former partners were by no means kind to him in his trouble, for they laughed long and loud at the comical picture he presented, and the older members of the company joined with them, until, to the acrobat's ears, at least, the very rafters of the new barn trembled.

Mr. Cushing and Uncle Daniel returned to their seats after making certain that young Ben was in no immediate danger, and Mrs.

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Cushing cried quite loud enough for her son to hear, that she hoped he would "hang there until he got rid of some of his nonsense."

Steve Powers, who had no particular love for young Ben since the day when the boy soaped his fiddle-bow just before he was about to give an exhibition at Fernald's Hall, began to play "I'll Hang My Harp on a Willow Tree" with such energy that the music could be heard above the laughter.

Jack Douglass, willing to make common cause with his rival against a boy who had played many a joke upon him, joined in with his fiddle, while the acrobat kicked and screamed in impotent rage.

Old Ben leaned back in the corner trembling violently, and with a face so purple that Toby was quite as much alarmed for his safety, as he had been that night when he first saw the old driver in one of his peculiar spells of laughter.

Mr. Treat was so convulsed with mirth that it seemed as if his thinly covered bones might be unjointed; but the fat lady, who had aided young Ben in his scheme, saw nothing comical in the boy's troubles, and did all she could

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to comfort him by consoling words, which the music and boisterous mirth completely drowned.

"He ought to be taken down," Toby suggested, after he realized that Master Cushing was not enjoying the mishap as much as were the others, "an' I'm goin' up to see if I can unhitch him."

"Let me go, Toby." And Old Ben rose to his feet as he spoke. "You couldn't hold him after you got him off the peg, an' it would be a nasty fall for the lad. It's kind'er rough to have his good time spoiled; but if this don't shake some of the circus nonsense out of him, then I'm mistaken."

It was by no means a simple matter, even for the old driver, to unhook the acrobat from his elevated peg; but he succeeded finally, and in an almost incredibly short time afterward there was a sudden flash of gorgeous costume as Master Cushing disappeared through the doorway, looking very much like a boy who found nothing to delight him in such foolish things as barn-warmings.

Several moments elapsed before the company could control their mirth sufficiently to

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be able to continue the regular amusements of the evening; but, when the dancing did begin, Old Ben and Toby went in search of the angry acrobat.

He was found in the house, having changed his acrobatic costume for one decidedly more becoming, and at once announced his determination to go home.

"I could have done the act well enough," he said, bitterly, "if only the folks had let me alone; but you see if I don't pay some of 'em off for makin' so much fun out of what wasn't anything at all."

"Now don't get into a snarl over what wasn't so very bad, after all," Old Ben said, in a fatherly tone. "If you'd slipped up that way in a show, you'd have suffered for it; but here it don't 'mount to anything but a little fun, an' if you go away an' miss the good time, you won't be disgruntlin' anybody but yourself."

Possibly Master Cushing had fancied that his departure would plunge the entire company into deepest grief, and he was decidedly disappointed because Old Ben did not take a similar view of the case.

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"You see now that you ain't so very much of a tumbler," the old man added, seriously, "an' that you wouldn't cut any great figger among them what know their business, so I hold to it that this night's performance has been a good one for you. It shows that the sooner you give up tryin' to be what you ain't fitted for, an' 'tend to your reg'lar work or play, the better it 'll be for all hands."

Young Ben was disposed to sulk over his failure; but when Toby urged him to return to the barn, and Old Ben walked away as if he had no further care in the matter, the acrobat followed him, muttering threats as to what he would do in the future to those who dared to laugh at him.

When Toby and Old Ben returned to the barn with Ben Cushing, the skeleton had gone into the loft, and there, in the hoarsest of hoarse whispers, was explaining to Uncle Daniel and some of the other guests why they would not hear the speech he had spent so much time in composing.

"I had hoped," he said, "to be able to express my thanks to the inhabitants of the town for the uniform courtesy with which

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they have treated me and my wife Lilly, who, by-the-way, does not feel equal to the exertion of coming up here. I wish all to understand, however, that both Lilly and myself are perfectly satisfied with our reception here, and I would also like to have the reason for my not addressing the company generally, made known."

While the thin man was retiring within the folds of his blanket again, from which he had emerged only long enough to make this whispered apology, Uncle Daniel assured him that no one could be offended because the speech was not delivered, and promised that each person should learn, if the fact was not already known, that the skeleton had a bad cold.

This assurance appeared to relieve Mr. Treat, and, after he had shown Uncle Daniel his written speech to prove that he would have been prepared to speak had it not been for his affliction, he began to make the most singular and violent gestures to his wife, which neither she nor any other person could understand.

Mrs. Treat patiently endeavored to guess what her husband meant by first shaking one

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end of the blanket at her, and then in the air. At first she believed he was simply making signals of affection, and smiled sweetly in return, which apparently made him very angry. Then she fancied he might be trying to call her attention to some one whom she had not greeted, and, in order to atone for any unintentional lack of courtesy, the fat lady bowed gravely to each in turn, much to the surprise of all.

After having done this, however, she understood that it was not what her husband wanted, for the blanket was waved yet more vigorously until, losing all patience, she cried:

"For mercy sake's, Samuel, *do* tell me what you mean, an' not set there wavin' that blanket like a jumpin'-jack."

Mr. Treat became confused by his wife's abrupt and uncomplimentary manner of speaking, and it was nearly sixty seconds before he could control himself sufficiently to say in a whisper, which must have been painful, because of the effort he made to speak loudly:

"It's supper-time, my love."

The fat woman was both surprised and an-

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noyed, because she had failed to understand that her husband was waving his blanket in the direction of the table, toward which he had cast many a wistful look since entering the barn, and atoned for her stupidity by sending Toby at once to request the musicians to cease playing.

Then she beckoned to Old Ben, and asked him to invite the company to supper; but he promptly refused to do anything of the kind, whereupon she summoned the guests by saying as loudly as possible:

"Supper's ready, an' Samuel thinks it's time we got at it, so let's all take hold now."

Uncle Daniel asked a blessing, after as many of the guests as could find standing-room had gathered around the table, and during fully half an hour the guests discussed the evidences of Mrs. Treat's and Aunt Olive's cooking to their thorough satisfaction.

After supper there was more dancing, games, and forfeits until the night was so far advanced that Uncle Daniel gave the signal to depart, by saying good-night to the hosts and hostess.

"You'll be over in the mornin', Toby?"

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the old driver asked, and added to Uncle Daniel, "I've come to think a good deal of your boy, an' like to have him with me the most of the time. If things had been different, I'd have had a little chap jest about his size to live with me."

Toby knew the old driver was thinking of Abner, and Uncle Daniel said, solemnly:

"The Lord's ways are not our ways, my friend, and it would be a sin for us to repine when He allows that one of us poor mortals may enter into all the glories of His kingdom without first being tried by the life here below."

XV

SETTLED DOWN

WHEN the good people of Guilford awakened next morning they admitted to themselves, if they had not done so before, that the barn-warming had been a great success, and that circus folks were wonderfully like other people, save in point of size.

Even those who had doubted the desirability of having Old Ben settle down among them, confessed that he seemed to be a "real nice kind of a man," and they "would not be surprised if he proved to be a good neighbor."

The only fault Uncle Daniel found with the party was that it had led him into the reckless dissipation of remaining out of bed until eleven o'clock, and he told Toby next morning that he expected him to retire that night at sunset to make up for lost sleep.

Toby considered this a particularly harsh command, since it was the last day of vacation,

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and the boys had arranged for a monster game of I-spy around the "meeting-house," but he made no protest, knowing full well how useless it would be to argue with Uncle Daniel.

At all events, he had that day to himself, and, according to promise, he was to spend at least a portion of it with Old Ben. He was not disposed to lose any time, being eager to learn how the skeleton was feeling after the barn-warming, and, taking Mr. Stubbs's brother on his shoulder, he set off, wishing heartily that school did not begin until after Christmas, and then was only kept open when the boys had no particular sport on hand.

The circus folks were eating breakfast when Toby arrived, and the boy needed but one glance at the skeleton to assure himself that the thin man was rapidly recovering from the effects of the cold.

During the first half-hour of Toby's visit the monkey was securely tied to a chair. But little was talked of save the barn-warming, and the projectors of the entertainment felt quite as well pleased, because it had been successful, as did their guests.

"It would have been a triumph, a positive

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triumph, if I had only been able to address the people as per this written speech," Mr. Treat said, in a reasonably loud tone, and holding up the manuscript which he had brought to the table. "When I have entirely recovered I shall call upon your Uncle Daniel and read it to him."

"I tell you it's a big one, Toby," Old Ben said, gravely. "Sam read some of it last night after the folks had gone, an' it sounded fine, even if he did have to whisper the words."

"Its effect will be greatly enhanced when I can deliver it with the proper inflection of voice," Mr. Treat added, proudly; and then he re-read it for at least the tenth time as he slowly sipped his coffee, while his wife gazed at him admiringly.

"Let's go out an' see what the barn looks like this mornin'," Old Ben said to Toby. "There's a heap of work to be done, settin' it to rights, an' the sooner I begin the sooner it 'll be over."

Sad experience had taught Toby that it was unsafe to leave his pet, even tied to a chair, in a room where he could get into any

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mischief, and he took the monkey under his arm as he followed Old Ben out-of-doors.

The barn was far from being as inviting-looking as it had been a few hours before. The decorations were torn and ragged; the table covered with unwashed dishes, and the floor, which had been so white, was stained and littered with bits of paper, straw, and withered evergreens.

Mr. Stubbs's brother appeared to think the barn had been expressly built as a play-house, for he broke away from his master almost as soon as Toby was inside the building, and began climbing on the festoons of evergreens as if trying to show what Ben Cushing might have done had he been a skilful acrobat.

"Let him go, Toby; he can't do anythin' more'n pull the trimmin's down, an', so long's we've got to do that ourselves, we may as well let him enjoy himself."

Mr. Stubbs's brother was, therefore, allowed to fancy himself having a most destructively mischievous time, and he raced from one end of the loft to the other, pulling down a wreath of evergreens here, or swing-

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ing on a festoon there, until Toby and Old Ben were highly entertained.

If the old driver had been in a hurry to set his new barn to rights while he was in the house, he seemed to have forgotten the fact, for, after watching the monkey's antics a short time, he seated himself on the band-stand, seemingly buried in deep thought.

"What's the matter?" Toby asked, as the moments went by and his friend gave no sign that he was aware any other person was in the barn.

"Well, Toby," the old man said, slowly, as he crossed one leg over the other and swayed back and forth while hugging his knee, "I was thinkin' of the first time I saw you, an' of the nights we'd ridden together on the monkey-wagon. Then, ag'in, the plans I'd made last summer came inter my mind."

"You mean about Abner?" And Toby spoke softly, almost reverentially.

"Yes, lad, I was thinkin' of the poor little cripple that your uncle says it's a sin to feel bad 'bout, 'cause he's gone where both of his legs is jest as good as anybody else's. Your Uncle Dan'l is a mighty good man, an' no one

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will go wrong who follers his advice; but yet I can't help feelin' bad on account of that little fellow's death. It's true I didn't know him—only saw him that day the circus was here; but after I was away I did a heap of thinkin'. You see, I ain't got anybody I can say really belongs to me, or that I belong to, an' when a man gets as old as I am he feels the need of somebody or somethin'. When I was ridin' on the monkey-wagon alone nights, I got to thinkin' 'bout the little chap, an' how he'd come to likin' me if I did all I could for him, an' then things looked a good deal different. I laid out to buy a farm somewhere 'round here, an' leave the circus for good, jest as I have done. Then I reckoned on the times we'd have together, him an' you an' me, till it seemed as if it would all come out that way. When your Uncle Dan'l wrote me that Abner was dead, an' put a lot of religion inter the letter that ought'er made me glad he was took away from his troubles, I tell yer, Toby, it kind'er broke me up, 'cause you see I'd made a lot of plans, even if I didn't know him."

Old Ben was not one to give way to any

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outward show of grief; but he sat there slowly rocking his body to and fro, chewing energetically on a straw, with such an expression of sorrow on his face that Toby's heart was touched.

"Don't feel any worse'n you can help, Ben, for everything has come out just as you thought about, 'cept that Abner ain't here, an' Uncle Dan'l says he's much better off."

"I know it, my boy, I know it, an' yet once in awhile I get lonesome thinkin' it over."

"But I don't see how you can when Mr. and Mrs. Treat are here."

"Well, that does kind of seem wrongin' them, don't it, an' they're jest as good as the days are long?" Old Ben said, thoughtfully. "But then, you see, they're only visitin' like, an' as soon as spring comes they'll be off agi'n. I allers took to you from the first, Toby, an' if you hadn't a good home I'd say you must come an' live with me. But that can't be, my lad, for it wouldn't be right, an' you'd learn more goodness from your Uncle Dan'l in an hour than I could show you in a year. I haven't got a child or chick in the world that cares what becomes of me; so

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once in awhile, when you're out playin' with the other boys, if you'll run in to see me for a minute or two, it 'll do a heap of good."

"Indeed I will, Ben." And Toby spoke so earnestly that it was not possible to doubt his truthfulness. "I'd always rather be with you than with the other boys, an' I shall be over here all the chance I get."

"Don't come any oftener than you want to; but it 'll make me feel better whenever I see you. Now I'm goin' to tell you one thing that your Uncle Dan'l thought I'd better not say anything about; but it won't do you any harm to know it, that I'm sure of. This farm an' all there is on it belongs to you."

"To me, Ben?" Toby cried, thinking his old friend had suddenly taken leave of his senses.

"Yes, my boy; I hadn't any one else to leave it to when the time come for me to drive in the parade up above, an' so I jest bought it in your name. I'm only holdin' the place in trust for you, an' when I'm gone everything 'll be yourn."

It was some moments before Toby recov-

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ered from his surprise sufficiently to speak, and then he said, as he put his arms around the old man's neck:

"You've always been awful good to me ever since the first time I saw you, Ben, an' if I can help it you sha'n't ever get lonesome any more, for I'll be here jest about all the time."

And high above their heads, among the festoons of evergreens, Mr. Stubbs's brother chattered and screamed, as if he knew all that had been said by those beneath him, and was heartily glad because Old Ben had settled down to a peaceful life, after having "knocked about with a circus, man and boy, for nigh onto forty years."

THE END

